



BLUE AND GRAY WEEKLY



Stories of Brave Northern and Southern Boys in the Civil War.

Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered according to Act of Congress in the year 1904 by Frank Tousey, 24 Union Square, New York.

No. 2.

NEW YORK, AUGUST 19, 1904.

Price 5 Cents.

AT THE FRONT! OR, THE BOYS IN GRAY IN BATTLE.

By Lieut. Harry Lee.



Jack made a leap forward, and tore the weapon from the hag's hand. Then he whipped out his sword, and wheeled to attack Pike and Dupree. The two spies feared he

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By LIEUT. HARRY LEE.

CHAPTER I.

ORDERS FROM GENERAL BEAUREGARD.

"Halt! Who goes there?"

"A friend!"

"Advance, friend, and give the countersign."

The sharp voice of the picket was in clear contrast with the muffled tones of the challenged.

It was a starlight night, and the picket in gray had just reached the end of his beat when a tall figure loomed up before him. Instantly he brought his gun to the charge and gave the hail.

But a short distance away were the rolling, sluggish waters of the Potomac River.

Along its banks were the entrenchments of two of the most powerful armies the world ever saw, waiting for the word to spring at each other in a deadly battle for supremacy.

The great difference of opinion between the North and the South had found culmination at last in that unavoidable and lamentable conflict which for a time antagonized friends and brothers, only, however, to result in a more firm welding of the tie which could never be really broken.

The North had rushed to arms with a celerity which was beyond conception, but the South had, with no less quickness, thrown to the front a splendid army of heroic fighting men, whose deeds of valor on many an honorably fought field furnish material for the historian and the romancer.

The great battle of Bull Run had been fought, and while it gave the South supreme confidence in their ability to maintain what they believed to be their rights, it also furnished the North with a lesson which they were not slow to profit by.

The raw, undisciplined troops were kept in the entrenchments on the east bank of the Potomac for months by General McClellan. But on the opposite bank the Army of the Confederacy was no less active in making organization.

The purpose of our story will be to follow the daring deeds and heroic adventures of a brave young company of Confederate boy soldiers, who styled themselves the "Virginia Grays," and were captained by Will Prentiss, the son of one of Virginia's most prominent men, Colonel Prentiss of Richmond.

The merits or demerits of either cause will not be discussed in our narrative. To-day we are pleased to honor the heroes of both sides, the brave soldiers of both the Blue

and the Gray. It is believed that the adventures of Will Prentiss and his brave boy soldiers will furnish a story of deep interest to readers, both North and South.

The Virginia Grays had taken part in the battle of Bull Run and were now in camp on the Potomac, awaiting the next move on the part of the enemy.

So it is thus we find the young picket demanding the countersign from an unknown person who approached him.

Only those who have paced the lonely beat at dead of night, with the unknown deadly dangers of the darkness frowning upon them from the direction of the enemy's lines, can understand the feelings of the man on guard, who knows that the fate perhaps of his comrades depends upon his vigilance and that the least laxity of duty might mean death.

In that black void beyond him he can easily conjure up all sorts of dangers. Sometimes these are realized. A cowardly bullet in the dark, a missile swiftly hurled or an unexpected attack in the rear may terminate his existence.

It is only when, at the end of the beat, he for an instant meets a fellow picket that he feels reassured.

The tall, muffled figure approached the picket slowly.

The starlight fell upon the glittering bayonet, the picket's cap was lifted from his brow and showed his face, white and set.

"Don't fear, Briscoe! It's only me!"

"Dupee!"

"Yes; you know me!"

"I think so, but—stand back! I want the countersign!"

"I haven't got it! Confound it! You know me well. I must see Captain Prentiss!"

The picket hesitated.

He knew the tall, lanky man before him right well. Dupee, the Confederate spy, was a trusted man, and in an ordinary case the picket might have let him pass.

But Briscoe, one of the bravest young soldiers of the Virginia Grays, was a staunch adherent of duty. He had his orders and could not disobey them, even to gratify so distinguished a personage as this man Dupee, the most trusted man in the Confederate service.

"I am sorry; I will call the corporal of the guard——"

"No, confound it, man! Don't do that!" whispered Dupee, angrily. "I must not be seen; I am on a secret mission. I can't go into camp heralded in such a way. You must let me pass."

Briscoe was silent a moment. Again Dupee made a move to pass, but the cold steel of the bayonet touched his breast.

"Stand back! Give the countersign, or you will not pass here to-night!"

One instant the spy wavered and seemed about to step back. Surely the proposition of the young picket did not seem unreasonable. To call the corporal of the guard, who would furnish him escort, seemed a simple matter.

But, quick as a flash, the spy gripped the musket and endeavored to wrench it from Briscoe's hands.

Bang! The weapon exploded and the bullet just grazed the spy's shoulder. Then the two became locked in a deadly embrace.

Briscoe was only a boy, hardly eighteen, and no match for the powerful man before him.

But the musket shot had given the alarm and he heard the signal given to turn out the guard. Down through the underbrush came the trampling of feet.

A night attack was not uncommon. Scouting parties often walked unwittingly upon the picket and a fight would follow, not of long duration but none the less desperate and bloody.

Briscoe was encouraged by the knowledge that aid was coming. The spy, seeing that his game was up, hurled him from him and cried:

"I surrender! You are a young fool! I will report you to your captain."

The next moment both spy and sentry were surrounded by the armed soldiers of the guard. The corporal briskly demanded an explanation.

"I am Dupee," said the spy, loftily. "I want to see Captain Prentiss. This is the first time I have been refused passage through the lines."

"How is this, Briscoe?" demanded the corporal, sternly. "Did he give you the countersign?"

"No!" replied the sentry, saluting. "I was only obeying orders."

"I can't always have the countersign," said Dupee, angrily. "I must have the privilege to go in and out as I see fit, and unhampered, or I cannot perform my duty."

"You shall have escort to the captain's headquarters," said the corporal. "Our picket may have been a little too zealous, but it was his duty to strictly obey orders. Fall in by fours! March!"

The picket, resuming his place, saluted. The guard, with Dupee in their midst, now marched away. So far as the picket was concerned the incident was closed.

But a short while later the spy entered the tent of the boy captain. At a camp table, examining some maps, sat a handsome youth whose soldierly build and manner at once impressed one.

An officer of the rank of sergeant sat near him. As the spy entered, the corporal saluted and said:

"This man is under arrest, waiting your orders, captain. He tried to break through the picket line without the countersign."

"Dupee!" exclaimed young Captain Prentiss, springing up. "What does this mean?"

"It means," said the spy, angrily, "that your picket would not let me through on recognition."

"He had orders to pass only on countersign," said Captain Prentiss. "You can hardly blame him for obeying orders."

The boy captain's face had a set expression which made the spy shrug his shoulders, while his keen, ferret eyes glittered like beads.

"I must have the privilege of passing through the lines when I wish. I cannot otherwise accomplish my duties."

"If you will apply to General Beauregard for a general pass, you will have no further trouble," said Captain Prentiss.

Again Dupee shrugged his shoulders. He dropped the subject, however, and, drawing from the lining of his hat a crumpled paper, he laid it on the table.

"An order for you," he said.

Captain Prentiss took the paper, and, smoothing it out, gave a start. On it was the stamp of General Beauregard's headquarters.

"CAPTAIN WILL PRENTISS OF THE VIRGINIA GRAYS:

"I have been informed that you are familiar with the region about Edwards Ferry. I have information that the enemy intend throwing their full force across at that point for an attack upon our lines. Immediately upon receipt of this, turn the command of your company over to a subordinate and proceed at once to Edwards Ferry. If necessary cross the river and work your way as far into the enemy's country as possible. Learn all you can and report to me at the earliest possible moment. The bearer, whom you well know, is on his way to Washington and will accompany you as far as the ferry.

"BEAUREGARD, General Commanding."

In an instant Captain Prentiss was on his feet.

"Do you know the contents of this message?" he asked the spy.

"Yes, replied Dupee, "but—that is not all. Before I had got a mile from headquarters I was overtaken by an adjutant who gave me yet another message."

He laid the paper on the table. Will took it up and read:

"GENERAL HEADQUARTERS, ARMY OF VIRGINIA.

"TO CAPTAIN PRENTISS:

"I hereby countermand orders sent you by messenger this day. You are to disregard said orders and upon receipt of this notify your colonel that your company is ordered to Edwards Ferry on special duty. My adjutant will meet you there with further orders.

"BEAUREGARD, General Commanding."

In an instant Will picked up his sword and belt and buckled them on.

"Sergeant Spotswood," he commanded, "notify Lieutenant Randolph of this order. I will report to Colonel English at once. This order does not mention you, Mr. Dupee."

"No," said the spy, rising, with a curious glint in his steel-gray eyes. "I am going straight to Washington. I shall report to headquarters later. To make sure that I will not have trouble in leaving this camp, kindly write me a pass, or give me the countersign."

Will snatched up his pen and quickly wrote a pass. It applied only to his company lines, but this was all that was necessary, for Dupee explained that he intended leav-

ing the way he had come. With a curt salute he left the tent.

The sergeant who had departed to execute the young captain's order, now entered. Behind him was a finely-built youth of about the age of Will Prentiss.

He saluted and said:

"I await your orders, Captain."

"Sit down here, Fred Randolph," said Will to his lieutenant. They were old friends, having been schoolmates in Richmond.

Young Randolph belonged to one of the best families in old Virginia. He was a youth of high principles and sense of honor.

With Will Prentiss he had organized the company of Virginia Grays, which was composed of youths from the best families in the South.

"Fred," said Will, "I have here General Beauregard's order to proceed at once with our company to Edwards Ferry. I believe that there will be fighting, for it is reported that detachments of the Union Army have crossed the Potomac at that point."

"Good!" cried Fred. "I only hope we shall have a chance to go into battle. It is hardly worth while being at the front and having no chance to fight."

"Very good! We may find the task an arduous one. Let the long roll be called and get the men into line at once. I will go and report to Colonel English——"

Will Prentiss did not finish the sentence. Sergeant Spotswood entered the tent and, saluting, said:

"Captain, I announce Colonel English!"

A man of severe manners, dressed in a spotless gray uniform, and who had the reputation of being the greatest martinet in the Confederate Army, entered the tent.

Will saluted his visitor, as did Fred. Colonel English spoke sharply:

"Captain Prentiss, I command you to call your men to arms and march to the Potomac River. Boats will there be in readiness to take you across, and I shall expect you to make a reconnaissance of the enemy's encampment, returning at daybreak."

"Colonel English, I am sorry," said Will, quietly, "but I cannot obey your command."

The colonel's face turned purple.

"What, sir!" he thundered. "You dare to set my authority at defiance? I am your superior. You are under arrest, sir!"

CHAPTER II.

ON A PERILOUS MISSION.

Will Prentiss unbuckled his sword and handed it to Colonel English.

"You are my superior officer, and I yield," he said, "but before going further please read this."

He laid the dispatches from General Beauregard before

Colonel English. The martinet held the first one up to the light and read it. Then he read the second.

His face changed.

"You are released from arrest," he said. "General Beauregard is the commanding officer. Who brought you these dispatches?"

"Dupee."

"The spy!" A cloud settled down over the colonel's face. "I don't like that fellow. I know he has the confidence of our Confederate Congress, but I believe he is a traitor!"

"A traitor!" gasped Will.

"Yes," declared the colonel. "I am almost able to prove that he delivered to Captain Clark of the Fairdale Blues, a company of Union soldiers in McClellan's army, the plans of our defences at Bull Run, and which resulted in the enemy gaining a tremendous advantage in the beginning of the fight."

"Dupee?" exclaimed both Will and Fred. "Are you serious, Colonel English?"

"I am always serious, young sir!"

"If there is any suspicion even—ought it not to be reported?"

"What, sir?" snapped the martinet. "You presume to dictate to me? Have a care!"

"I beg your pardon, Colonel," said Will, with a bow. "Shall I not obey General Beauregard's orders?"

"Yes, though I don't see why he didn't send them to me instead of to you."

"I think I can explain," said Will. "It is probably on my father's account. You know he is on General Beauregard's staff. It is a secret expedition, and——"

"Yes! yes! That is explained, sir!" said the testy colonel. "See that General Beauregard's orders are obeyed. This man Dupee—has he left the camp?"

"He has, Colonel."

"Humph! I am sorry; I wish you had held him. I would like to have questioned him. I wish you success, Captain."

Colonel English bowed. The young officers saluted, and the colonel departed. All looked relieved.

"Well," said Fred, with a shrug of the shoulders, "did you hear what he said about Dupee and Captain Clark?"

"Captain Clark of the Fairdale Blues!" said Will, with a strange softening of his voice. "A few months ago we were school chums at the same college in the North. A finer fellow don't breathe than Jack Clark. We were friends, and now we must meet on the battlefield as deadly foes."

Will's voice broke a little.

"War is the worst of all evils, Fred," he said. "It should not be, but—fate has decreed it. We must fight to the end. I remember at Bull Run how gallantly Jack Clark's company, the Boys in Blue, covered the retreat. Our men admired them!"

"But, if Dupee is a traitor——"

"That cannot be, Fred. Ah, Sergeant Spotswood——"

The sergeant, removing his cap, stood before the young captain. He held in his hand a small package.

"Here is something, sir, which I picked up just outside the tent," he said.

Will took it, with some surprise as well as curiosity. It was carefully wrapped up in oiled silk. This Will removed and slowly unrolled a wide and long strip of stiff paper.

The paper was covered with drawings. Astonished, Will and Fred spread the paper out on the table.

A glance was enough.

"Whew!" exclaimed Fred, aghast. "It is a perfectly accurate drawing of our encampment, Will!"

The young captain's face paled.

"That is so," he said, in a low tone. "Some one who has entered this tent dropped it. The value of that to the Union foe would be great. Can it be——"

The two young officers looked at each other. They knew that no member of the company could have in his possession such a drawing. Certainly, Colonel English had not dropped it.

"Dupee, the spy!" whispered Fred. "What would he be doing with plans of our encampment, Will?"

For a full minute they sat there looking at each other. They recalled Colonel English's hints regarding Dupee. Will was half tempted to take the plan to Colonel English.

He regretted long after that he had not done so. But he folded the paper again in the silk and placed it in the pocket of his coat.

"We will keep this, Fred. It may be of great importance yet. Do you recall that Dupee tried to get by the picket?"

"Yes."

"All right; we will keep our eyes open. Scipio! you black rascal! Where are you?"

From an inner part of the tent came a colored man, dressed half in livery. He had been a faithful servant in the Prentiss family in Richmond for many years.

"Yes, Marse Will."

"Look after things here, Scipio, until we come back," cried Will.

"A'right, Marse Prentiss."

Then Will and Fred left the tent. The long roll had called the company from their quarters, and they were in marching order when the two young officers appeared.

The Virginia Grays were the pride of the encampment. Their handsome uniforms, perfect drilling and military spirit excited everyone's admiration.

"Boys!" cried Captain Prentiss, as he took his position at their head, "we are going on a perilous expedition; we may engage the enemy in battle before we return. We are under marching orders from General Beauregard. We are going to Edwards Ferry, a distance of ten miles. Every man is expected to do his duty!"

"Three cheers for the Confederacy!" cried Fred, raising his sword.

They were given with a will.

Then, at the tap of the drum and in perfect order, the

smart little company set out. Down the regimental street they marched, between the white walls of tents.

From many of these, sleepy soldiers peered out, wondering what it all meant.

Before that smart and brave little company should return many would be missing from its ranks and many a hard and thrilling experience would be theirs.

For they were at the front and were going into battle, though they knew it not.

For some miles they marched along the Leesburg Turnpike. It was reckoned that they should reach the ferry by two o'clock.

There was no moon, but the sky was clear and the starlight made objects quite plain on either side.

Once they were challenged by a sentry holding guard over a small encampment of Confederate cavalry, but they passed on.

All felt secure, for Confederate videttes, mounted and on the alert, were established all over the region. Such a thing as an ambush did not seem possible.

With regular step the Virginia Grays marched on, their dauntless young captain and his lieutenant at their head.

At last, however, they came out upon a high headland which overlooked the Potomac River.

The waters shimmered in the starlight below them. Far away, beyond the opposite shore, a red glow against the sky told of the location of the Union encampment.

Edwards Ferry was just below, and the lights could be seen.

Down into the little ravine marched the Grays. Suddenly a man on horseback was seen standing in the middle of the road.

"Halt!" His voice rang out loud and clear.

"Company halt!" cried Will. Then he advanced a few steps and demanded:

"Who goes there?"

"Adjutant Jones of General Beauregard's staff. Are you the Virginia Grays?"

"We are," replied Will. "Advance and give us General Beauregard's orders."

The adjutant, who was in Confederate uniform, reined his horse nearer, and said:

"General Beauregard's orders are to cross the ferry and march one mile north by the highway. You will there find another detachment and await further orders."

Will saluted, and the adjutant giving rein to his horse galloped away.

"Forward! March!" cried Will. And the Virginia Grays went on again at quickstep. The landing of the ferry was but a short distance away.

When they reached the place the ferry-keepers were found to be in readiness with two barges. It would be necessary to make four trips to get the company across the river.

The soldier boys began to board the barges and Will and Fred stood on the landing supervising the task when Sergeant Spotswood stood before them and gave a salute.

"Captain," he said, "one of the ferrymen tells me that the Union men are in force at Harrison's Island, a few

miles above here. If we go across and they attack us in superior numbers—what will become of us?"

"Sergeant," said Will, sternly, "that is not for us to consider. We are under orders, and it is not for us to question why."

The sergeant saluted silently and walked away. Fred Randolph whistled softly.

"Your theory is heroic and beautiful, Will," he said, "but supposing we did march right into a nice little trap over there?"

"We would fight!"

"Superior numbers would drive us into the river."

"Well," said Will, with some thought, "I don't believe in foolhardy moves, but of course, General Beauregard knows what he is doing. His orders must be obeyed."

"That is true," agreed Fred. "I can see that there is no appeal. But—suppose the man Dupee is a traitor, as Colonel English declares—and the dispatches are bogus——"

"My soul!" gasped Will. "Don't think of it, Fred. I couldn't believe it."

The young Confederate captain paced the landing, and the awful possibility caused his blood to grow chill.

Certain facts, the words of Colonel English, and the finding of the plans dropped by the spy, had led him to distrust Dupee.

He was placed in a hard position. He did not see his way clear to disobey orders, and on the other hand there seemed to be an almost moral certainty that all was not right.

Will Prentiss was deeply attached to his brave company. He would have sacrificed his own life gladly rather than lead them into an ambush.

Once he had raised his hand to stay the embarkation.

The company, full of life and spirits and undaunted courage, was boarding the flatboats with merry jest and remark. Their handsome uniforms flashed in the starlight; their youthful faces were eager and bold.

Perhaps in an hour the deadly fire of masked batteries might mow them down in a ghastly heap. The cowardly ambush might claim them as victims.

Will stepped impulsively to the edge of the landing, impelled to give the order to disembark. Then he steeled his nerve.

"It is a soldier's duty to obey," he said, rigidly. "I have no proof that there is anything wrong."

So the flatboats swung out into the stream and the brave little company was ferried across.

On the other shore they formed silently. They were now in the enemy's country. All precaution was necessary.

"Forward! March!" said Will Prentiss, in resolute tones, and the little company in gray marched away northward over the dusty road.

The country became hilly and rough as they marched on. Far ahead the dark outline of woods could be seen. A rail-fence zigzagged in the foreground.

Suddenly Lieutenant Randolph stepped forward and placed a hand on his captain's arm.

His face was pale as death.

"Will, we are trapped!" he said. "Look over there!"

To the right, over a ridge of land, twinkled a light. Ahead, in the edge of the woods, another flashed up.

In an instant Will Prentiss gave swift and comprehensive orders to his men. They were formed quickly in three lines behind the rail-fence in the road and lay flat on their stomachs in the dust.

All was silent. If there was an ambush, there was as yet no evidence of it. There was not a shot fired, there was no attack.

The Boys in Gray could not help but wonder at this. What did it mean?

Finally Will decided to act.

"Sergeant Spotswood, I leave you in command. Come, Fred, let us go ahead and reconnoiter a little."

The captain and the lieutenant climbed through the rail-fence and crept cautiously up the slope.

In a few moments they had reached the summit. The sight they beheld was a startling one.

Below them on the plain lay the encampment of a large body of Union troops. They knew that at the moment they could not be far from the picket line.

Mystified, the two young Confederate officers gazed upon the scene.

"They are fully five thousand in force," said Fred. "Do you suppose General Beauregard expects us to attack them, Will?"

"Of course not; but why were we ordered over here?"

"I give it up!"

Just then a startling thing happened. Far down the highway came a strange sound, like the boom of thunder.

CHAPTER III.

AT HENRY'S HOUSE.

"What is that?" exclaimed Fred, as he started up.

"It sounds like the rumble of artillery wagons," said Will. "It is coming up the highway. If it is Union artillery there will surely be a collision with our boys."

The two young officers started back down the slope.

There was no doubt but that artillery was being galloped over the highway from the direction of the Ferry.

Both Will and Fred knew the danger of a collision at present with any of the Union forces.

Almost surrounded as they were with such superior numbers they would be forced to surrender.

When the young officers reached the rail-fence quick orders were given for a change of position.

By the best of good fortune an excellent opportunity was offered them for concealment.

A hundred yards ahead the highway was lined with a cornfield. Into the tall growth of the corn the Confederate Boys in Gray dived.

Crouching in this clever concealment they awaited events.

They were not long in coming.

Into view down the highway in the dim light came the figures of horses and men. The artillery division thundered by on the full gallop.

A full battery it was, and it seemed to be in haste. The Boys in Gray peered out through the cornstalks and wondered what it all meant.

"It looks to me as if there was going to be fighting somewhere, Will," said Fred.

"I should say so! But the mystery is, why were we ordered here? We cannot face such a foe. There is no one here to meet us and give us further orders."

"Will Prentiss, it is a cowardly game of that Dupee to effect the capture of our company."

It did certainly look plausible to the boys that this was a fact. Their indignation was now only exceeded by their anxiety.

There was no longer any doubt that they had been sent on a wild goose chase by the traitor, who believed that they would certainly meet with capture. It was certainly a desperate predicament for the Boys in Gray.

As the conviction became stronger, the situation was made the subject of general discussion.

To be sure, there was no ambush planned, for the cunning Dupee knew that this was not necessary, for the chances were strong enough that almost in the enemy's lines and with the river at their back the Boys in Gray would never return.

Also, it was plain that after months of inaction the Army of the Potomac was making an aggressive move of some sort.

"We are in a dangerous position," said Fred Randolph, decidedly. "Dupee ought to be shot. No doubt before this the ferry is in the hands of the Union troops. The whole river bank will be patrolled by them. We have no boats; we have nothing to eat beyond twenty-four hours' rations; we cannot go ahead, it would be madness to fight, and we cannot retreat. What can we do?"

It was an appalling reflection.

It looked as if the Virginia Grays would never see their regiment again. Discovery would be almost certain when daylight should come.

The whole dastardly plot of the traitor, Dupee, was plain. The orders purporting to come from General Beauregard were forged.

The adjutant who met them at the ferry was doubtless Dupee himself, in disguise. It was all a cunning trick to betray a full company of the Confederate soldiers into the hands of the Yankees.

"And that fellow has held the full confidence of the Confederate Congress," said Will Prentiss, excitedly. "If we ever get back to Dixy land alive we'll see that the scoundrel gets his just deserts."

"No danger of finding him there," declared Fred. "He'll never show his head in the Confederate lines again."

Just then Jim Champney and Joe Cutler, a couple of privates, crept up through the corn and saluted.

"If you please, Captain Prentiss," said Jim Champney, "I'm acquainted in this region myself. Over there a leetle ways is the house of Jack Henry, and he's a right peart kind of a man. If you'll give us permission, Joe and I will go over and see him, and mebbe he can do a heap to help us out of this scrape."

"You think he is a loyal Confederate?"

"I know he is."

"Your suggestion is a good one. I'll go over with you. Fred, I'll leave you in command. Now, don't move out of this cornfield unless you are discovered."

"All right, Captain," replied the young lieutenant.

So Will, with Champney and Cutler, crept away through the corn.

Jack Henry was a typical Virginia farmer. His house was a substantial affair, partly of logs, with a corncob chimney. As the three Boys in Gray crept into the yard a dog ran out, barking.

Instantly a door flew open and a man with a gun appeared on the threshold. He was plainly visible in the fire-light of the interior.

"Be still, Mose! Come back hyar. If thar's any pesky bushwhacker out there, I'll put a hole in him. Hello, thar! Who cums?"

"Friends!" cried Will, stepping boldly forward. "Put up your gun."

"Not till I know ye, friend," said the planter, cautiously. "Who are ye?"

"Don't ye know Jim Champney, Jack?" cried Champney. "Of course ye do."

"Hello, Jim! Is that that you?" cried the planter, dropping his gun. "Walk in, an' make yerself to hum. Ther confounded Yanks are so thick around hyar just now thet I have right smart work to keep 'em from stealin' everything I've got. Yes, you 'uns are all welcome. Cum right in."

The three Boys in Gray walked into the spacious room of the house, lit up brightly by the fire on the open hearth.

It was a typical Southern home, but the colored help, the children, the housewife, all were gone.

"I've sent my fólks up to Alexandria," explained Henry. "I'm jest stayin' here all alone to keep the Yanks from burnin' the place. So ye're in service, Jim?"

"Yes, Jack," replied Champney. "And this is my captain, Will Prentiss."

"Not the son of Colonel Jeff Prentiss?"

"Do you know my father?" exclaimed Will.

"My stars! I should say I did, boy! He an' I went to deestrick school together. He is a right peart sort of a man."

"I agree with you, Mr. Henry," said Will, "but now let us get down to business. You are a loyal Confederate, Mr. Henry?"

"I should say I was."

"Well, I must tell you that a traitor sent us across the river at Edwards Ferry and we are now, one hundred of

us, or our full company of Virginia Grays, hiding in your cornfield. We realize that we have been sent into a death-trap. Can you help us out of it?"

Planter Henry stared at Will in sheer amazement. It was some moments before he could seem to fully take in the situation. Then he exclaimed:

"Gee-rusalem! Do you know that five thousand Yanks are encamped not two miles from hyar?"

"We have discovered the proximity of a large encampment."

"Wall, I should say. They'd eat your leetle company up in a jiffy. You'd better get across the river as quick as you can."

"That is what we want to do. We don't dare to risk going back to the ferry. Can you help us out?"

The planter's face wore a sympathetic expression, but it was plain that he regarded the problem as a serious one.

He was deeply thoughtful.

"You're in a tough fix," he said. "I think ther hull bank of ther riyer is patrolled, all the way to ther ferry. I've got a boat at my landing, but it won't hold a dozen."

"That is all right, if we can make the necessary trips in safety," cried Will, eagerly.

"I dunno; hang me if I can guarantee ye that. Of course, if ye was diskivered, the alarm would bring 'em all down onto ye. But I kin furnish ye the boat and ye kin try it."

"It shall be done. A dozen trips over will transport our company. One more question, Mr. Henry. What is going on? What are the Union soldiers up to? There is a move of some sort on foot."

"I should say so!" cried Henry, eagerly. "Don't ye know what it is? Wall, I'll tell ye. They're goin' to attack Leesburg."

"Leesburg? They are going to cross the river?"

"Yes."

"Whew!" exclaimed Will. "We ought to send General Beauregard a dispatch at once."

"Humph!" said Henry, incredulously. "Ye might as well try to fly. You 'uns will do well do get back across the river alive! The Yanks are concentrating at Harrison's Island. They mean to cross thar at Balls Bluff. Then they will take Leesburg by surprise."

"I've got the whole story. The Yanks don't know it, but I get onto every move they make."

The effect of this upon Will Prentiss cannot be described.

He saw at once the value of this discovery. He saw how necessary it was that the news should reach Beauregard. It would be easy enough to mass a heavy force at Balls Bluff and drive the Yankees back into the river.

The more Will thought of it, the more impressed he was with the plan. It seemed to him like a great opportunity.

Before more could be said on the subject, footsteps sounded outside the house. In an instant Henry was upon his feet.

"Look out!" he whispered; "they are Union soldiers. I

know from their footsteps. Hide for yer lives! Hyar ye are! Get in, quick!"

The planter hustled his three visitors into an adjoining room. In another moment they were in darkness.

But there were cracks in the door through which they could plainly see the interior of the fire-lit room.

What was more, a window looked out upon the yard, and, peering through this the trio of young Confederates were thrilled to see a troop of Union horse.

There were fully two-score in the troop, and it was an exciting reflection that but a few hundred yards away, hiding in the cornfield, were the Virginia Grays.

Had this fact been even suspected by the Union soldiers the result would have been thrilling enough.

Up to the door of the planter's house there strode three Union officers.

Henry opened the door in response to the loud rap.

Every word he uttered was plainly heard by the young Confederates in the adjoining room.

"Good evening, sir!" said one of the officers. "Is your name Jack Henry?"

"I reckon it is, Cunnel," replied Henry.

"This is your farm?"

"Yes."

"We are on the track of a number of Confederates who have been seen near here. Can you give us any information?"

It seemed an age to the boys before Henry replied, nonchalantly:

"I reckon I can't, Cunnel."

There was a brief conference between the Union officers. Finally the spokesman resumed:

"Your fire looks inviting, Mr. Henry. Can't we ask the privilege of sitting by it a few moments and writing some dispatches?"

The planter stepped back.

"Sartinly, Cunnel! Walk right in and make yourselves easy. I've got a leetle corn whisky fer ye, though I'm pooty well cleaned out of stuff by your foragers. Would ye mind givin' orders to your men not to trouble my chicken coop?"

"Most certainly!" and the Union colonel stepped back and spoke sharp orders to his men.

Then they entered.

"This is a sample of real Southern hospitality, Baker," said the spokesman, a tall, fine-looking man in major's uniform.

"That's right, Stone," said Colonel Baker, for he it was, the brave man who was to lead the fight at Balls Bluff the next day and who had just received the commission of a major-general and which was afterwards found in his blood-soaked hat.

The third officer was a mere youth, yet handsome and alert. At sight of him Will Prentiss suppressed an exclamation.

"My soul!" he whispered, "it's my old school chum, Jack Clark, of the Fairdale Blues."

"Captain Clark," said Colonel Baker, as all three sat at the rude table, "let me know the result of your recon-

naissance this morning in the vicinity of Balls Bluff. I will jot it down and send the dispatch to General McClellan."

"Very well, Colonel Baker," replied Captain Jack Clark.

Then he proceeded to give in detail his story. Planter Henry picked up a jug and walked boldly into the room where the young Confederates were in hiding.

"Don't git scared," he whispered. "I'm doing this to fool them. They'll never think of coming in hyar, now. Keep yer heads an' ye'll pull out."

It is needless to say that Will and his companions admired the clever tact and shrewdness of the Virginia planter.

Henry emptied some whisky from another jug and went back into the living-room. He placed some battered mugs on the table, together with a plate of honey and some corn cakes.

"It's the best I kin give ye, friends. It ain't a heap, but if ye'll call arter the war is over mebbe I kin do better by ye."

The three Union officers laughed.

"I suppose you expect flush times under the regime of the Confederacy, Mr. Henry," said Colonel Baker, as he picked up a corn cake. "I don't drink whisky, but I wish you long life and good health under the flag of the Union."

CHAPTER IV.

IMPORTANT INFORMATION.

The toast brought Major Stone and Jack Clark to their feet.

"We echo the sentiment," both cried. The planter took from the mantel a corncob pipe.

"I can't drink to such a toast," he replied, with easy manner, "but I'll smoke a pipe of old Virginny for the long life of the Confederacy, an' arter ther question is settled, a long peace an' good will atween us."

Colonel Baker laughed and said:

"If all the adherents of both sides looked at the matter in your calm and unimpassioned way the question would have been settled peaceably long ago."

"I don't believe ther oughter hev been any war," said the planter, "but now we're into it, we'll show ye how we kin fight."

The three Union officers laughed good-humoredly and then returned to their discussion.

"You found the country in the vicinity of Balls Bluff clear of the enemy's outposts, did you, Captain Clark?"

"I did, Colonel Baker," was the reply. "I penetrated the woods almost to Leesburg."

"Then in your opinion we can make a safe landing by way of Harrison's Island?"

"At present, yes, sir."

"Very good," said Colonel Baker. "I will write dispatches right here to all the officers of our division. Baxter's Fire Zouaves, Owens' Pennsylvania Regiment, Harris'

Cavalry and Morehead's Pennsylvania Regiment, numbering about 3,000 men, will be included in the expedition.

"They will cross at daybreak to-morrow and with all dispatch move on to attack Leesburg. We can, I think, strike the enemy a telling blow and get back safely before any large body of the Confederates can be brought up."

Slowly and with clear enunciation this plan was detailed.

Every word was heard by the young Confederates in the next room.

To Will Prentiss it was a revelation which made his blood tingle. Its importance was easily recognized by him.

Was it after all the hand of Fate that had led him, with his brave soldier boys, into this place? The value of the discovery he had made was inestimable.

But one thought occupied his mind at that moment.

This was to get out of the house safely, evade the Potomac patrol and get the Grays back across the river that night.

Then before morning could come, to personally carry his discovery to the telegraph office at Leesburg, dispatching General Beauregard the full particulars.

Then with the Grays he would march rapidly to Balls Bluff and oppose the landing of the Union troops as far as they were able.

Perhaps the result of the battle at Balls Bluff as historically recorded was due altogether to the incidents in Planter Henry's house which we have just described.

Will Prentiss memorized every word uttered by Colonel Baker. It was an exciting moment for him.

Finally, however, all the dispatches as dictated by Colonel Baker were written. The Union officers had been in the house not quite an hour.

But it seemed a year to Will. However, Colonel Baker now arose and said:

"Mr. Henry, we must thank you kindly for your hospitality. Do you live alone?"

"I reckon I do, Cunnel, jest now. I sent mah fambly up to Alexandria. It ain't no place for 'em here until you Yanks get out of ther way!"

"All right, Henry! I guess you did the right thing. But if any of my boys molest you, report to me. I'll attend to their case."

"Thank ye, Cunnel!"

"We wish you good night."

"Good night."

The three officers went out into the night. Through the window Will and his companions saw them mount their horses and the whole cavalcade dashed away.

Planter Henry closed the door and called out:

"Fooled 'em, good and slick! Come out, friends an' hev a jag of corn whisky."

Champney and Cutler drank with Henry, while Will hastily made notes of the revelation he had gained.

"Now, Henry," he cried, "you heard what they said?"

"About ther crossing at Harrison's?"

"Yes."

"Well, I told ye that afore they came in."

"Very good, but we have now the time of the crossing. Leesburg must be saved. We must get back across the Potomac at once."

The planter lit his pipe.

"All right," he agreed. "Git right back as quick as ye kin."

"You can help us."

"I'll try."

"Very good. Give me advice. You say you have a boat?"

"Yes, a small bateau. Mebbe it'll hold ten on a pinch. But you must remember patrols hev been set along the Potomac within a few hours."

"You think there is one at this point?"

"I know it."

Will was thoughtful a moment. Then he said:

"Henry, lead us down to the mooring place of your boat. I want to see if the patrol passes anywhere near there."

"I'll do it, Captain."

Henry raked ashes over his fire. Then he went out and closed the door behind them.

They followed him silently across the wide plain, back of the house. A huge belt of timber now intervened to the river bank. But a road led down through this to a lower intervale.

A small creek ran out of this intervale. In the mouth of this the boat was kept.

As Henry explained, the patrol galloped along the bank above, just in the verge of the timber belt. It did not take Will Prentiss long to decide upon a clever move.

As there was a wide interval between the patrol he reckoned that it would be safe to march the Boys in Gray down to the verge of the intervale.

Here they could lurk safely in the shadows of the trees while their companions, eight or ten at a time, in the interval between the passing of the patrol could be ferried across.

Of course, there was some risk that the boat might be seen.

But on the whole the plan looked logical and was the only one that could be safely adopted.

Will decided upon it.

Back to the Henry house, therefore, they went rapidly. The young Confederate captain's nerves tingled with excitement.

He knew that if he could get across in time to send a dispatch to Beauregard, and that the result would be the blocking of the Unionist plan against Leesburg, he and his little company of Virginia Grays would win great credit.

He was determined to succeed.

In due time they reached the planter's house. Will said sharply:

"Champney, you and Cutler remain here and keep your eyes open. Wait until I return."

Then Will set out for the cornfield.

As he drew near the highway he was given a great start. The distant beat of a drum was heard.

A body of soldiers was coming up the road. Far away in the starlight he could see the dark, moving mass.

It was all plain to him.

The Union troops were on the move.

They were massing at Harrison's Island, ready for the move on Leesburg. Will paused a moment.

He knew that scouts were in advance of that body of infantry. Some of them must be at this moment right at hand.

He sank down in the deep grass. It would not do for him to move the Grays from the cornfield as yet.

So he waited and listened to the rapidly approaching tap of the drum. The Boys in Gray hiding in the corn kept low.

Nearer drew the marching body of Union soldiers.

Soon Will saw a couple of the scouts leap the rail-fence and approach the house. They passed very near him.

At the house the scouts were met by Henry, who, with his keen Virginia wit, easily fooled them.

They went on in a few moments. Then the brigade of Boys in Gray came into plain view.

They made a brave appearance as they marched by in regular order. At their head rode their major and colonel.

It was a critical moment for the Boys in Gray. They were not many yards from the marching columns and discovery would have been an easy matter.

In fact, it was only narrowly escaped. Several of the Union soldiers leaped the fence and dashed into the corn looking for ears.

But the month was October and the ears had been gathered long since, leaving only the dried stalks standing. If they had gone deeper into the field they would surely have run into the young Confederates.

Sergeant Spotswood, who had been left in command, with Lieutenant Randolph, by Will, was on the qui vive. Of course, discovery would have meant a running fight, with what results it was hard to predict.

After the infantry came the usual string of stragglers. It would have been just as fatal to be discovered by these.

But finally all had passed and the last man was vanishing from sight. Will arose and walked into the cornfield.

"Virginia Grays," he said, in a clear voice, "fall in by column right."

In an instant the Grays were on their feet and out of the corn. They fell in with alacrity.

"Well, Will," exclaimed Fred Randolph, excitedly, "we had a close call, didn't we?"

"I should say we did, Fred. But we are not out of danger yet."

"Of course not, but—you have a plan?"

"Yes."

With this, Will hastily imparted to his young lieutenant his plan to cross the Potomac and dispatch General Beauregard in regard to the crossing of the river by the Union troops at Balls Bluff.

Fred listened with interest.

"Hurrah!" he exclaimed. "That will win fame for us, Will. We must not fail!"

"There is no such word as fail," cried Will. "Virginia Grays, forward, march!"

In good order the Grays marched to the timber belt. Jack Henry, the planter, viewed them with glistening eyes.

"By hoe-cakes!" he cried. "Ye've got a handsome company of boys thar, Captain! Thar's nothing in the Union Army to touch 'em, I tell ye."

"They are all brave boys," said Will. "They hope to distinguish themselves."

The column split now into fours and as the road narrowed they marched by twos down the wood road to the intervale.

There was complete silence as they marched. Every man stepped lightly and no conversation was the order.

In due time they reached the intervale. Here the company was halted. Will selected ten of the boys as the first to cross.

Henry came back in a few moments and said:

"The patrol has just passed. Ther coast is clear."

At this the boys selected to cross marched down to the water's edge.

In a few moments they were in the scow, Henry doing the steering while several of the boys gave way at the oars.

Over the muddy current they passed in safety to the opposite shore. Back came the barge for another load.

Ten times the passage across the river was made. The boys climbed the bank and formed in line.

The Virginia Grays were saved! They had slipped out of the cunning trap so treacherously laid for them by the traitor-spy!

Jack Henry, the planter, stood on the river bank and Will pressed several gold pieces into his unwilling hands.

"I don't want ther money, boy," he said, in a voice thick with emotion. "Give it to ther good old Confederacy, an' may ye win honor on ther battlefield. God bless ye!"

"Boys of the Virginia Grays," cried Will, "three cheers for brave Jack Henry, who brought us to safety, and three times three for the Confederacy!"

There was no risk now. They were on Dixie soil and safe.

Right lustily the Boys in Gray cheered. Their voices echoed and re-echoed across the old Potomac. That they were heard on the other side became evident by random shots from the Union patrol.

The Grays marched back from the river a safe distance and then a halt was called by Captain Prentiss.

"Fred," he said, to his young lieutenant, "you know what the situation is, and what our duty is. I am going to take Spotswood with me and strike for Leesburg to telegraph General Beauregard. I command you to take charge of the Grays. March at once to a safe point near Balls Bluff and bivouac. Then wait for me."

"All right, Captain," said the young lieutenant, with a salute. "I wish you the best of luck."

Arrangements were quickly made. The Boys in Gray cheered their young commander and then marched away.

Will Prentiss and Joe Spotswood were left by themselves. No time was lost.

The young captain took the lead and started away across country. The fate of an army depended upon him now.

CHAPTER V.

BOYS IN GRAY IN BATTLE.

Those who have read of the fiercely fought battle of Balls Bluff may recall the fact that the Union troops crossed safely, with the expectation of finding a clear course before them to Leesburg.

Instead they were met with an overwhelming force of Confederates, and on the spot was fought one of the most savage and desperate contests of the war.

The Union generals never knew just how it happened that the Confederates appeared so suddenly and in such force. It was all due to the quick action of Captain Will Prentiss of the Virginia Grays.

On and on ran the young captain and his sergeant through the night.

They were south now of the Edwards Ferry Turnpike, and suddenly an embankment appeared before them.

They climbed it and stood upon the roadbed of the London & Hampshire Railroad.

This railroad led to Leesburg and the two young officers started down the tracks.

"Whew!" exclaimed Joe. "I wish a train would come along. We'd stop it and get aboard."

"Hold on!" cried Will. "Here is an idea better than walking, at least. Yonder is a handcar house. The railroad men are not here, but in the interests of the Confederacy we will seize that car, if there is one to be found there."

A moment later they reached the railroad men's shanty.

It was but a moment's work for Will to investigate the lock. The door was not of very strong construction.

The two young officers quickly solved the problem. An iron rail taken from a pile nearby made a good battering ram.

The door gave way and the handcar was quickly placed on the rails.

Mounting it Will and Joe gave way at the crank and the car rolled away toward Leesburg.

It chanced that the grade was in their favor and they made fast time. Before long the lights of Leesburg came into view.

Up to the little depot they ran and lifted the car from the tracks. Then Will rushed into the telegraph station.

"General Beauregard's headquarters at Manassas, quick!" he cried to the operator. "It is a matter of importance."

The operator instantly struck the key. He got the Manassas wire at once.

"For General Beauregard," he repeated, as Will gave the message. "Important movement of Union troops to-night. Crossing at Harrison's Island and Balls Bluff. Move on Leesburg to-morrow. Five thousand men. Send reinforcements at once."

"CAPTAIN WILL PRENTISS, Virginia Grays."

Will and Joe sank down quite exhausted after sending the message. They thought of starting to join the Grays at Balls Bluff.

But Will exclaimed:

"I am physically unable to go further just now, Joe. There will be no fighting until to-morrow. Fred will look after the boys. We must get some sleep."

"There is a good tavern——" began the telegraph operator.

"No," declared Will. "Can't you give us a blanket, and we will stretch ourselves out on the benches here."

The operator kindly found a couple of army blankets for them, and the young officers reclined on the waiting-room benches. They were asleep instantly.

It was daylight when they awoke, and the roar of a train filled their ears. They sprung up and were electrified to find the station platform lined with Confederate soldiers.

Special trains brought them in, regiment after regiment. Beauregard had got the dispatch and was going to meet the Union attack.

Will and Joe now hastened to procure some breakfast. Then the boy captain said:

"Joe, we've got to get to Balls Bluff as quickly as possible. No doubt the Grays have reached there and may be even now in battle. It will take us too long to go on foot. We've got to find horses."

"That will be an easy matter," said Joe. "I think most any loyal Virginian will sell his horse to either of us."

Joe's prediction proved correct. A couple of horses were found and Will bought them at a reasonable figure.

The two young officers mounted and rode swiftly away.

As they did so they passed columns of marching men on their way to the front. It was an exciting scene.

The Virginia Grays were to go into battle that day. No wonder the two young officers were thrilled with eagerness as they dashed on down the highway.

In due time they reached the vicinity of the bluff, but they were held back by their own outposts.

"The Yanks are already across and getting ready to advance," said a picket. "It isn't safe to go nearer."

But Will was looking for his own company of brave boys. It was not long before he found their bivouac.

The reunion was a joyous one, and the Boys in Gray cheered their young captain. The prospect of a battle had fired all with zeal.

The Confederate leaders were already on the field, and

it was decided to take position in a screen of woods in the path of the invading foe.

Here a desperate stand would be made and the invasion of Virginia repelled, if such a thing were possible.

Will had got ready to move his company into position in the line when he was accorded a great surprise.

A man and a young girl, mounted on handsome horses, came galloping up. At sight of them a wild cry of joy burst from Will's lips.

He rushed forward to meet them.

"Father and sister Nellie!" he cried. "This is an unexpected joy! What has brought you here?"

Colonel Jeff Prentiss dismounted and embraced his son. Pretty Nellie Prentiss, Will's charming sister, rushed into his arms.

"Oh, Will! General Beauregard has done nothing but praise you!" she cried. "You have done a wonderful thing in letting him know about this latest move of the Yankees."

"Yes, Will," cried Colonel Prentiss, "you have come in for great praise!"

Will's eyes sparkled with joy.

"You hear that, boys?" he cried, turning to his company, who were drawn up in line. "General Beauregard praises us for brave work. Let us show him to-day what we can do in battle."

The Virginia Grays cheered wildly.

"But come, Will, we want a few words with you in private. Only think, we are upon the eve of a terrible battle, the outcome of which none of us can even guess."

Will's face grew grave.

"You are right, Nell," he declared. "No one can tell the outcome. Some of us will give up our lives for our country this day."

Colonel Prentiss removed his hat.

"May God defend the right," he said. "May His will be done." Then he placed a hand on the young captain's arm.

"Tell us all about it, Will. How did you get the information of this move on Leesburg?"

Will then told the story of Dupee's visit to the Confederate camp with the dispatch from General Beauregard and the later one which countermanded the first.

Exclamations escaped both Colonel Prentiss and Nellie.

"That explains it!" cried the young girl. "We now know how you happened to take your company of Virginia Grays along with you across the Potomac."

"What?" exclaimed Will. "It was General Beauregard's order."

"No," declared Colonel Prentiss. "Therein lies the treachery of Dupee. He was given a dispatch from General Beauregard for you ordering you to take a scouting trip across the Potomac at Edwards Ferry. The first dispatch was genuine, but the second one was a cowardly forgery!"

Will struck his hands together.

"I felt that there was something wrong about it," he

cried. "I could not believe that General Beauregard would send us over there to die or be captured."

"It was infamous! If Dupee is ever caught in our lines he will hang!"

"He deserves it!" cried Nell. "You surely did well to get the boys back alive, Will."

"It is all owing to the planter, Henry," declared Will. "He was of vast assistance to us. But—there is something of interest to you, Nell. One of the three Union officers whom I overheard was Jack Clark of the Fairdale Blues."

Nellie Prentiss blushed violently.

"That cannot interest me now," she said.

"Ah!" said Colonel Prentiss, "don't say that, Nell. Jack Clark is a fine fellow, and you know you like him."

"But he wears the blue," she said.

"Never mind! The war will soon be over, and the Confederacy established. Then he will come over to your views."

"I am not counting on the latter contingency," said Nell, with spirit. "If he can't come now, he surely cannot later."

"Pshaw, Nell!" cried Will. "You must remember Jack is a Northerner and I must respect his loyalty. When the war is over I for one shall again seek his friendship."

"Well said, Will," declared Colonel Prentiss. "When the question of the Confederacy is settled, you will find that the North and the South will be better friends. They are brothers and this division is merely to settle a few vexed questions. Supposing a foreign nation declared war upon us. You would see how quick the North and South would unite against the common foe."

Nell made no reply, but there was a slumbering light in her eyes which it was not hard to interpret.

In their school days before war was declared Will Prentiss and Jack Clark had been chums. Jack had visited at the Prentiss plantation.

There he had formed an attachment for Nellie which was ripening into love when the war broke out.

The Prentiss Plantation had been one of the finest in Virginia.

Colonel Prentiss had many black slaves, but they were never conscious of their yoke. Their privileges were unbounded and the kindness of "Marse Prentiss" always held them loyal.

Few people of to-day have a proper conception of the nature of things in the prosperous era of the South before the war. Little is left of the old plantation life of good cheer and free-handed hospitality.

Nellie Prentiss was a girl of no ordinary attainments. Her mother had died when she was quite young and she had grown up much by herself on the old plantation.

This had imbued her with a certain spirit of self-reliance which was an advantage to her now.

Her sympathies were strongly with the people of the South. She believed the principle of the Confederacy was right.

Believing that, she was eager to do all in her power

to further its interests. So when her father and brother went to war she declared, with spirit:

"I cannot don a uniform and enter the ranks, but there is a way in which I can benefit our government."

So Nellie traveled to Washington. She had wealthy relatives there who were high in social and political circles.

It was easy for her to intrigue and listen and get possession of many valuable secrets of state. These invariably found their way to Mr. Davis or the Congress of the Confederacy.

In other words, pretty and vivacious little Nellie Prentiss was a Confederate spy.

Her fate would have been an unpleasant one had she chanced to be caught. But this calamity did not overtake her.

Colonel Prentiss and Nellie now mounted their horses. They had barely done so when the blare of the bugle was heard.

The long roll call began to call the men to arms. Firing sharp and rapid was heard in the direction of the river.

"The Yanks are coming!"

This was the word passed from lip to lip. The Confederate soldiers rushed into line and waited for the enemy's charge.

The Virginia Grays were in the van and crouched under the cover of the woods. Suddenly the blue uniforms of the Union soldiers were seen.

"Here they come!"

The shout went up:

"Hold your fire!"

The order went along the line and all was silence and eager expectancy. On came the blue columns.

They furnished a grand spectacle and looked formidable enough.

But the Confederate officers held back the order to fire until it seemed as if the masses of blue must merge with the gray.

Then the order went along:

"Fire!"

The crash of the muskets was terrific. The leaden hail cut into the blue ranks like terrible knives. Great gaps were opened. Piles of dead and wounded arose.

One moment the Union line wavered. Then it came on again.

But only to meet the withering fire of the second line of defense. Again the Union men were mowed down.

Their officers could be seen madly exhorting them, but the best of efforts could not avail to re-form the blue line.

It wavered and slipped back. Now the order went along the Confederate line:

"Fix bayonets!"

All knew what this meant. A bayonet charge is a desperate resort and always means deadly fighting, but every member of the Grays was ready.

CHAPTER VI.

ORDERED TO HEADQUARTERS.

The Confederate order to charge went along the line.

From the woods sprung the line of gray. They swept down like an avalanche.

It seemed as if they must carry all before them, as if the blue line must be swept back into the Potomac to drown.

But the unexpected always happens. The Boys in Blue fell back almost to the verge of the bluff and made a stand.

And a stubborn one it was, too. The Confederate companies hurled themselves against the Union line. But to no avail.

It held like a rock, there almost at the brow of the awful bluff. In vain the charging Confederates tried to drive them over.

Greater valor was never shown on any battlefield. Balls Bluff must go down into history as one of the bloodiest and fiercest fights of the war.

The little remnant of Union soldiers, men from Massachusetts and Pennsylvania, were hardy soldiers and fought like veterans. Beauregard's men hurled themselves again and again into the attack.

The Virginia Grays had participated in several charges and always with credit. They were steady and cool in battle.

But Colonel Prentiss sat upon his horse and shook his head sadly.

"It is too bad to have to mow those brave fellows down this way. They are in a trap and must be defeated."

This was certainly the truth.

With the river behind them, the Union troops could not retreat. There was nothing for them but to fight to the death or surrender.

The latter course they would not accept. So the bitter contest went on.

Will Prentiss saw with a sense of gratification that the Fairdale Blues were not in the fight.

Stern duty would have demanded that he send his men against them in deadly conflict. This was now unnecessary.

The Grays fought nobly and fairly.

Thus the afternoon wore on. Had Colonel Prentiss massed his men and made a grand movement forward he might have exterminated the whole Union force.

But he was a broad-minded man. He looked upon the present conflict with wide open eyes and a liberal spirit.

The Unionists were sure to be defeated, in fact, were already beaten. Victory was all that was necessary.

Useless slaughter or extermination would have been barbarous. It was this spirit alone which saved an almost general massacre at Balls Bluff.

The Union colonels were trying in vain to cover the retreat of their main body. A heavy skirmish line hung over

the brow of the cliff and kept the Confederates in partial abeyance.

But the commanding officer was decided to end the battle.

So he shouted orders to bring up the Virginia Grays and six other companies.

"I want you to make a final charge," he cried. "Drive every Yankee into the Potomac. The battle must be ended."

The Grays fixed their bayonets. The critical time had come.

Will and Fred at their head, with drawn swords, gave orders to fall in and march. They joined the other companies and now moved forward.

Presently the order came sharply:

"Forward! Charge bayonets!"

The Confederate line was now almost in touching distance with that of the Union men. Instantly the Grays sprung forward.

Into the lines of the Blues they rushed. A desperate hand-to-hand conflict followed.

"Surrender! Surrender in the name of the Confederacy!" shouted Will.

"Never! We die, but never surrender!" was the answering cry.

The scene was one awful to behold. The ground was strewn with dead and dying. Blood was everywhere.

The Union soldiers yet clung to the brow of the bluff and desperately fought the Confederates back. For a time they held their position.

But there must come an end to all things. Colonel Cogswell gave the Union soldiers the order to abandon their guns and swim the river. A general rout followed.

The Virginia Grays took many prisoners. Some companies rushed upon the defenceless Union soldiers, striking them down.

But the Grays did not. Will Prentiss gave every order, and every captured Unionist was cared for.

But by this time the battle had become a rout. The Grays chased the Union soldiers into the Potomac, capturing all whom they could.

One officer, silver-haired and noble of mien, had stood at the front of the Union line through the whole battle.

He had fearlessly exposed his life and now met the fate of a brave and defeated man. A bullet struck him and he fell.

Will was glad to see that the Confederate soldiers made no effort to prevent his men from carrying him off the field.

He was the brave Colonel Baker who had projected the unfortunate enterprise. He had died a soldier's death.

With the fall of Colonel Baker the Union troops became demoralized. They scattered and fled wildly, some leaping into the river, others running up or down the banks.

On that battlefield lay nine hundred dead and wounded of the Union soldiers. The Confederate loss was about three hundred.

Night was at hand and the Confederates, weary with

the day's fighting, did not follow up their victory further.

All through the night the defeated Unionists could be heard, evacuating Harrison's Island and retreating to the Maryland shore. It had been a terrible defeat for them.

The Virginia Grays rested on their arms and now had time to count up their losses. It was with sadness that Will found that nine of his brave boys had given up their lives.

Fourteen were wounded, among them being Fred Randolph, who had been shot through the left hand. This, however, did not incapacitate him for duty and he insisted on remaining at his post.

Corporal Sam Payton had a scalp wound and Sergeant Spotswood had a flesh wound in the arm. Captain Prentiss had escaped without a scratch, though he had been exposed throughout to the enemy's fire.

One-fourth of the brave little company, therefore, had suffered death or injury. It was evidence that they had not shirked their duty.

They bivouacked that night on the field of battle.

So exhausted were they that they were glad enough to roll themselves in their blankets and sleep right on the ground where they had fought.

Will Prentiss, in the midst of his company, became oblivious to the world and slept until the reveille brought all to their feet with the rising of the sun.

All through the night the sad work of the hospital department had been going on. The Union regiments had been allowed to send a detachment across to bury their dead and care for their wounded.

The Sanitary Commission flag now hung over the field and the white dresses of the nurses, fair angels of mercy, fluttered everywhere, giving cheer and succor to both blue and gray.

The different companies now were ordered out for inspection, and the Virginia Grays, minus one-fourth their number killed and wounded, fell into line.

But of this one-fourth many had only slight wounds and would be able to rejoin the company soon. Enough recruits were on the waiting list in Richmond to more than fill the places of those who had been killed.

So that the ranks would be filled with other boys, eager to join the Grays, in a very few hours, or as soon as the Grays got back to the general encampment.

Colonel Prentiss welcomed the Grays most joyfully, and the boys were cheered by the other companies who were aware of the brave work they had done.

Now that the battle was over, the Union prisoners were placed aboard the train and sent to Manassas, whence they would be sent to the different Southern prisons to await an exchange or parole.

Also, most of the Confederate companies were ordered back to Manassas. A special order reached Colonel Prentiss:

"Detach the Virginia Grays from their regiment and send them to Manassas for special service.

"(Signed) BEAUREGARD."

So it happened that the Grays were given a car of the special train, and shortly after the noon hour were whirled away to General Headquarters.

They disembarked at Guilford, for only this part of the railroad was in the hands of the Confederates. Thence the march was taken up to Manassas.

Through Pleasant Valley, Groveton and Newmarket they marched to Manassas Junction, where they again boarded the cars for Manassas and General Headquarters.

General Beauregard's headquarters were at Manassas, and here now was the nucleus of the great Southern Army.

Every hour it was being swelled in numbers by the arrival of fresh recruits. The scene was one of immense activity and excitement.

As the Grays filed out of their car they were met by an orderly, who said, with a respectful salute:

"General Beauregard presents his compliments to Captain Prentiss, and has delegated me to show you your camp ground."

"Please return my compliments to General Beauregard and state that I will report to him as soon as my company is quartered," said Will.

Then, with the muffled notes of the drum, the Boys in Gray fell into line and marched to their place of bivouac.

As it had been impossible for them to bring all their camp equipage from Leesburg new tents were given them. In a short while they were comfortably sheltered, however, and snug for the night.

For darkness had shut down and the memorable day was over. Will Prentiss now called his first lieutenant into his tent.

"How is your wound, Fred?" he asked.

"Of no account at all," replied the brave little officer.

"I am ready for another try at the Yankees."

"That was a glorious victory, Fred!"

"Well, I should say!"

"Now, I am anxious to find out what special service General Beauregard has for us. I will leave you in command while I go over to headquarters."

"All right, Will."

The young captain hastily buckled on his dress sword and donning his cap left the tent.

He crossed the drill ground and approached the tent which General Beauregard used as a Field Headquarters.

An orderly stepped before him and saluted.

"Please present my compliments to General Beauregard and tell him that Captain Prentiss awaits his orders."

The orderly retired. In a few moments he returned and said:

"General Beauregard commands you to enter at once."

Will followed the orderly, who lifted the flap of the inner tent. The young captain stood in the presence of several richly uniformed officers, who were seated at a table upon which were spread a vast array of maps and plans.

CHAPTER VII.

ON A DANGEROUS MISSION.

Will Prentiss was for a moment abashed in the presence of the distinguished company. He stood hesitatingly a moment in the tent entrance.

But General Beauregard, beside whom sat General Johnston, held out his hand.

"Prentiss, my boy, come here and shake hands. I congratulate you upon the brave work that you and your little company of Virginia Grays have done."

"I must join in that," cried General Johnston. And the other officers hastily expressed the same sentiment.

Will instantly felt at home, and, advancing, shook hands with the famous Generals. Then General Beauregard said:

"I have heard of Dupee's treachery. He delivered my dispatch to you, did he?"

"Yes, sir," replied Will. "He gave me two dispatches from you."

"Two? I sent you but one."

"The first commissioned me to cross the river into the enemy's country alone and do a little scouting. The second dispatch countermanded the first and told me to take my company to Edwards Ferry and your adjutant would meet us there with further orders. A mounted officer did meet us there and ordered us to cross the ferry and march north. Upon complying with this order we found ourselves right in the Union lines, and it was with great difficulty that we extricated ourselves by hiding in a cornfield and recrossing the river in the darkness. It resulted, however, in our discovering the Union plans for a crossing at Balls Bluff."

"An unparalleled bit of treachery," declared Beauregard, sternly. "The second dispatch was a forgery and a game of Dupee's to deliver you and your company into the hands of the foe. He probably thought his treachery would never be found out. Did you ever hear of a more treacherous game, gentlemen?"

"Never!" chorused the other officers.

"I have offered a heavy reward for Dupee, dead or alive."

"I certainly think our boy captain here is entitled to great credit for so cleverly extricating his company from so serious a scrape," said General Johnston.

"Not all the credit belongs to me or my men," said Will, modestly. "A clever and brave planter, named Jack Henry, gave us his boat and assisted us to escape."

"Prentiss," said General Beauregard, "we have formed a high opinion of your ability. I will be glad to offer you a position on my staff, if you care to accept."

"The honor is greater than I deserve," replied Will. "but I am bound by many ties to my company of Virginia Grays, and, with your permission, I think I may perform better service by remaining with them."

"He is right," said General Johnston, "but we may have

to detach you once in awhile on special service, for we feel that you are to be trusted and have abilities out of the common."

"I am at your service, gentlemen," said Will, saluting.

His manner and words plainly impressed and pleased the great Generals. General Beauregard indicated a seat at the table.

"Be seated, Prentiss. We want you to listen to a little plan we have here."

Will took his seat at the table diffidently, but his diffidence vanished as the plan unfolded itself.

He saw that the maps and plans before him were those of the Union encampment on the opposite banks of the Potomac. Also of the country intervening.

This region intervening, and which had been fought over in the battle of Bull Run, really belonged to neither army, yet was a constant skirmishing ground for both.

Hundreds of petty fights and encounters took place daily in this region. Foraging parties swept it and scouts and raiders met and clashed. In the long months that the two armies faced each other along the Potomac a constant drama of excitement and action was being enacted here.

General Beauregard swept his hand over this region.

"Do you see this section, Prentiss?" he asked. "It is dangerous ground. Somewhere in this region is a man whose head is worth more to us than a whole regiment of Yankee troops. He is the notorious spy and murderer, Zenas Pike. He must be captured. We have a plan by which it can be done, but only cool nerve and astute work can do it. Do you understand?"

"Yes," replied Will.

"We have sent a dozen different scouts out to capture him. Every one has failed. Gaze upon these letters."

On the table lay a file of dingy letter sheets. On them was written in red blood the following inscription:

"TO BEAUREGARD: The Old Fox still runs. This is written with the blood of the last man you have sent to capture him. With compliments of ZENAS PIKE."

Will had heard of the famous Union bushwhacker and spy. He knew that he was one of the keenest and deadliest villains and assassins that ever lived.

His cowardly and treacherous work had been denounced by both armies. He posed as a partisan of the Union, but he was really fattening upon the plunder which he could reap from either.

Beauregard had in vain tried to capture him.

Pike was a cunning and able spy. So clever was he in the matter of disguise that he penetrated the Confederate camp at will, and within a few hours had even stood, unknown and unsuspected, in the presence of General Beauregard.

He was a menace to the lives of the Confederate officers themselves. He was greatly feared.

Pike had a rendezvous somewhere in the vicinity of Vienna, or about half way between the lines of both armies.

He had a few followers, not over a dozen in all, and each was addicted to the same cowardly trick of shooting from ambush or waylaying a passing guard or picket. Nearly every night one or more victims of Pike's fiends were brought in from the picket lines.

Will laid the blood-stained letters upon the table and his face grew set and firm.

"I think I understand, General Beauregard. You wish me to undertake the task of capturing these bushwhackers."

"Precisely, Captain Prentiss."

Every eye was upon Will. It would have been no discredit to the young captain if he had declined the commission. It was outside his province.

"Mind you," rejoined Beauregard, "I do not order you to undertake the mission. It will necessitate your taking leave of your company for a time, although that would be feasible, for they are not likely to be called into action again for some time."

"General," said Will, quietly, "I am honored by the preference you have shown me. I will gladly take the commission."

The other officers looked at each other, and the gaze of each kindled. It was plain that they felt admiration for the young captain.

"Give it some thought," said General Beauregard. "You are not ordered to leave your company. It is your choice."

"I shall hope to be not long absent," said Will, quietly. "There is one thing in my favor, gentlemen. I am very familiar with the region about Vienna and Fairfax Court House, as my father's plantation is not far from there. I shall take with me four picked men of my company, and I will hope to report very soon."

General Beauregard brought his fist down forcibly upon the camp-table.

"Johnston," he cried, "I tell you, this is the boy for that job. I'll wager my sword that he succeeds."

"I sincerely trust he will," replied the great General, quietly.

"If there is anything you need, Captain, I shall be pleased to furnish it," said General Beauregard. "But remember, you have not only Zenas Pike and his bushwhackers to deal with, but roving companies of Union raiders. Keep your eyes open."

"I will do my best," replied Will.

Then he saluted and left the tent. He at once started for his own tent.

He knew well enough the enormity of the undertaking he had assumed. He realized that it was one of deepest peril.

But this did not deter him. Better risk life in such an enterprise than to remain inactive in camp.

It was hardly likely that there would be another sally by either army for some time. The Virginia Grays, therefore, would be in for a long period of inactivity.

This would be irksome, indeed. So Will was on the whole rather delighted with the prospect offered.

When he reached his tent he found Fred Randolph awaiting him. The young lieutenant's face wore an eager, questioning expression.

"Well, Will," he finally asked, "what is the good word?"

Will at once gave an account of his conversation with the Confederate Generals. The young lieutenant's face was flushed and eager.

"You are going to take four of our boys with you, is that so?"

"Yes."

"Take me?"

The young captain shook his head. It pained him deeply to refuse.

"I am sorry, Fred," he said, "but you are lieutenant, and it is necessary for you to remain with the company."

Disappointment showed in Fred's face. But he saluted and said:

"I shall obey orders."

"Tell Joe Champney, Ben Cutler, Sam Payton and Joe Spotswood to report here at once," said Will. "I have selected them as my companions."

Fred saluted and went out. It was not long before the four members of the Virginia Grays named entered the tent.

Will then told them of his purpose and of the perilous nature of the mission.

"If any of you choose to remain behind," he said, "you are at liberty to do so. I will select some one else."

"Not me!" cried Joe Champney. "I'd go through fire and water with you, Captain."

"So would I," cried Cutler. All eagerly expressed their willingness to go. So the question was settled.

It was now past nine o'clock. General Beauregard had agreed to furnish horses for the five young soldiers. These had already arrived and were in readiness, fully saddled and bridled.

The matter of equipment was quickly decided upon by Will. Each man was to carry a carbine and pistols. They were to wear their regular field uniforms.

They were quickly ready, and all the other members of the company turned out to bid them farewell and wish them good luck.

Then the little cavalcade of scouts rode out of the encampment. They passed the first line of sentries and soon were out on the main highway.

They galloped on and passed other sentries and finally reached the outer picket. Soon even the outposts were behind them and they were on the highway to Fairfax.

The railroad to Alexandria was not far distant, though trains traversed it, for batteries occupied its course.

The daring little band was in the danger zone, the region between the two armies, which was the stamping ground of bushwhackers and desperate armed bands. Thrilling dangers were all about them.

CHAPTER VIII.

ON THE SCENT.

Going into battle requires a far less amount of courage than to enter blindly into the uncertainty of a dark night's mission like this now assumed by our Boys in Gray.

On the battlefield dangers are visible and lie revealed before one. But the grim blackness of the unknown yawned hideously before them now.

They now slackened speed and proceeded with more caution. Joe Spotswood rode beside Will.

Joe was possessed of remarkably acute hearing, and when he suddenly reined in his horse the others did the same.

"Somebody is coming this way," he said. "Better pull to one side and wait."

"All right," agreed Will; "here is a good place."

A few acres of oak scrub was on one side of the road. Into this they now made their way.

The distant thud of a horse's hoofs was now heard. Soon in the gloom the forms of a horse and rider loomed up.

It could not be discerned in the darkness whether the horseman was Union or Confederate, whether a bushwhacker or a peaceable planter. The horse was trotting.

Will decided to halt the unknown rider and inquire his business. So he spurred his horse out of the oak scrub and into the middle of the road, calling out, sharply:

"Halt!"

At the same moment the other boys rode out in the rider's rear. The horseman pulled up and looked about him quickly.

Apparently seeing that he was hemmed in and that flight was impossible, he sat still and called out:

"Hi! What do you 'uns want of me? I am only a poor farmer an' ain't do nobody no harm."

"Very good," said Will, spurring nearer: "if you tell the truth no harm shall come to you. What is your name?"

"Bill Simmons, an' I live in Sudley."

"Very well, Mr. Simmons. Let's have a look at you in the lantern's light."

Joe Champney flashed the rays of a dark-lantern upon the fellow. Certainly he was not of prepossessing appearance.

He was a man of the type known as "white trash," meanly dressed and unkempt and dirty. Bushy whiskers hid the lower part of his face.

The only thing about him that was at all comely was the horse. The animal was handsome and of the thoroughbred stamp.

"Well, Simmons," said Will, "you seem to be just what you claim to be. Where have you come from?"

"Alexandria!"

"Ah! You've been in the Union lines?"

The fellow lowered his voice.

"Sh! Don't speak so loud; thar's a heap of ther blue-backs right over ther hill yonder. Oh, no, they wouldn't hinder me, fer I took in a bag of potatoes to sell."

Will gave a great start.

"You say there are Union soldiers just over the hill?" he asked.

"Yes, I reckon!"

"How many?"

"Oh, a right smart lot ov 'em; mebbe a hundred."

Will, as well as his companions, gave a great start. This was startling news.

The proximity of such a body of Union soldiers meant that a reconnaissance of some kind was being made. It also reminded the Boys in Gray of the danger of their position.

If they were discovered there might be a fight, and perhaps they would be captured. Will had no desire to cop with a force so superior in point of numbers.

For a moment there was silence. Suddenly Simmons spoke again:

"I reckon you are scoutin', eh? Are ye lookin' fer any one in pertickler?"

A sudden thought struck Will.

"See here, Simmons," he said, sharply; "you know how things are in this region. You go in and out through the lines. Did you ever hear of a man known as Zenas Pike?"

The white planter gave a start. For a moment he was silent. Then, with a sort of a queer chuckle, he said:

"He's supposed to be a Union spy, ain't he?"

"He is a bushwhacker and a villain," declared Will.

"I reckon ye're right. I've heerd of him. So ye are lookin' fer him, eh? Want ter hang him?"

"No; we want to take him to General Beauregard's headquarters."

"Ye'll never do that. Zenas Pike is too keen. Ye'll never git him alive. Ye may git his dead body!"

"Do you know anything about him?"

Simmons chuckled again.

"I know whar he an' his gang hide," he made startling reply. "I kin take ye right to the spot. But—it's wuth something."

"Name your price," cried Will. "You must take us to that spot, Simmons."

The fellow turned his horse and started into the oak scrub. His manner was suddenly alert and quick.

"Git out of ther road," he exclaimed, in sharp tones.

"Lively! Git into the woods hyer or your necks won't be wuth a copper cent."

The Boys in Gray obeyed none too soon. The clatter of horses' hoofs had already caught their ears.

They had barely reached shelter in the woods when the Union scouting party dashed by.

It was plain that Simmons had told the truth, and that he had estimated the number in the squad about right.

"Thar, didn't I tell ye?" he exclaimed, when the danger was past. "If it hadn't been fer me ye'd have rode right down onto them chaps."

"You are all right, Simmons," cried Will. "Now, name your price."

"I'll take ye to ther place fer a hundred dollars in gold."

"It's yours," agreed Will.

"See here," said the fellow, lifting the brim of his hat and fixing his gaze upon Will. "Ye'll have to take ther lead when we git thar. I don't want no trouble with Zenas, fer he has a big follerin'."

"That is all right; just show us where he is."

"I'll do that. Now, tell me suthin'. Did Beauregard send you out to catch Zenas Pike?"

"Yes."

"Humph! I hope ye'll be luckier than ther others he has sent. I'll tell ye, Zenas is a bad egg."

"That is right," agreed Will, "but time is valuable just now. Are you ready to fulfill your contract?"

"This very minute," agreed Simmons. "Fall in, gents. Forward! March!"

The fellow reined in his horse in front of Will and leaped him over a fallen tree into a path which led away into the woods.

The Boys in Gray followed. They rode on in the timber for a long while. Through wild glens and across dashing streams until finally they came to a clearing which sloped to the banks of a stream. Beyond was a high and rocky bluff.

"Sh!" exclaimed Simmons, in a whisper. "Do ye see the cabin down thar by ther creek? Wall, that's Zenas holds out. Ye see, thar's a light in the window. I reckon he or some of his men are down thar jest now."

"Good!" whispered Will, eagerly; "we'll surround the cabin——"

Simmons put up his hand.

"Wust thing yer could do!" he declared. "They'd git away underground. There's a passage leads a half mile or more into ther woods. Ye can't catch Zenas that way."

"Well," said Will, disappointedly, "your advice has seemed good thus far, Simmons. What do you advise now?"

Simmons was silent a moment, then he said:

"Thar's only one way. You and I must creep down thar and take a look inter ther place through the winder. It's mighty risky, but I s'pose I've got to earn that hundred!"

"I am with you," exclaimed Will, as he slipped from his horse.

"Are we to go, too?" asked Joe Champney.

"No, I reckon not," objected Simmons. "Ther captain an' I are enough. You chaps kin wait here until we come back."

So Will and Simmons left their horses and crept down the slope. Presently they came into a path which led to the bushwhacker's cabin.

"I reckon Zenas is thar," declared Simmons, in a whisper; "or anyway it's some of his gang."

The murmur of voices could be plainly heard. Simmons drew back as they crept up to the rear of the cabin.

"Jest peek in ther winder, lad," he whispered. "Be keerful, now."

Will crept cautiously to the cabin window. The scene he beheld gave him a thrill.

The interior of the cabin was not unlike that of other dwellings of the kind. A fire burned on a brick hearth and the sparks flew skyward from the corner chimney.

Before the fire a withered old crone was engaged in stirring some liquid in a hanging pot. The cabin was wretched and squalid in the extreme.

But these things Will only took in at a glance, and then his attention was claimed by that which caused him to give a little gasp of surprise and horror.

In a chair beside the hearth sat a young girl. She was fair as a dream, but pallid and wan.

"Nell!" gasped Will, with a chill of horror. "It is my sister!"

It was, indeed, Nellie Prentiss. Will remembered that from the battlefield of Balls Bluff she had started for Washington. It looked as if she had fallen into the hands of the bushwhacker and been brought to this place by force.

That she was here, against her will was plainly revealed by the fact that her ankles and wrists were bound.

She was a helpless prisoner.

Will's bosom swelled with indignation. To see his sister in such a condition and in such a place caused him to forget all else.

"The scoundrel!" he gritted. "He shall pay for this. Have no fear, Nell, I am here to rescue you."

But even as he spoke a stunning blow on the back of his head partly deprived him of his senses. Powerful arms were thrown about him and a hand pressed over his mouth.

Helpless, he was lifted and carried into the cabin. The young girl uttered a little scream of horror, but the hag thrust a gag in her mouth. She turned and faced the so-called Simmons.

"What's up now, Zenas? What on airth are ye doing? Hain't we in trouble enuff without gittin' more mouths to feed?"

Strangest of chances, indeed, it was that had caused Will and his Boys in Gray to run across Zenas Pike, himself, in the very clever disguise of Simmons, the poor planter.

And right shrewdly had the cunning bushwhacker and spy deceived the young Confederate officer.

"Shut up your jaw, marm!" gritted the bushwhacker. "Thar's four of his friends up in the edge of ther clearing. Ye'll have 'em down onter us the first thing ye know."

"Great sallymanders!" piped the beldame. "How are ye goin' to git rid of 'em?"

"Leave thet to me," said Zenas, as he darted out again into the night. He went flying up the slope to the spot where he had left Will's companions.

CHAPTER IX.

IN DURANCE VILE.

When the bushwhacker reached the spot where he had left the Boys in Gray he grasped the bridle of his horse and whispered, hoarsely:

"Ther captain says for you to ride with me to ther outlet of ther underground passage from ther cabin. Zenas is down thar, and we kin drive him into his hole an' you kin nab him when he comes out."

It all looked plausible to the boys. Not the least suspicion assailed them.

So they dashed away after the supposed Simmons into the heart of the forest. They must have covered several miles and were beginning to wonder if all was just right when Simmons suddenly pulled up and said:

"Sh! I think I hear hosses comin'. Wait here till I take a leetle bit of a look ahead."

The boys pulled up and their guide rode slowly ahead. Presently he was out of sight. Then his horse was heard galloping madly over a path which led in another direction.

"Treachery!" cried Spotswood. "We've been fooled, boys. Harm has come to Captain Will. After that scoundrel!"

The boys put spurs to their horses and dashed after the spy, but he was far out of hearing now, and they were hopelessly lost in the dark forest.

Zenas Pike, who knew every footpath, was making a direct course back to his cabin.

Meanwhile Will had regained his senses and was able to once more realize the true state of affairs. It was a terrible calamity which had befallen him and his sister, Nellie.

She was still sitting helpless in the chair when Will opened his eyes and gazed at her.

Both were gagged and neither could speak, but they exchanged comprehensive glances.

Will writhed in his bonds and tried to break them in vain.

The old beldame, who was crooning over the hearth, noted this. She took a heavy horse-pistol from the shelf and placed its muzzle to Will's temple.

"Keep still, yer milk-faced sop, or I'll blow yer brains out," she declared. "I'd jest as soon do it as not. An' you, too, you hussy!"

Then she went back to her occupation. It was a strange and terrible situation. Helpless and bound there in the cabin of the bushwhacker Will realized that there was little hope.

He at first wondered why his brother soldiers did not come to his rescue, or at least make investigation. Then he remembered that Zenas had left the cabin and was no doubt leading them away or perhaps into a deathtrap.

Will knew too much of the bushwhacker by reputation to fancy that there would be any use in appealing to his better nature.

He was, like all of his class, a natural murderer.

Why he had not killed the young Confederate officer at once was a problem. Will could ascribe it to no element of mercy, but rather to a whim.

The moments passed and they seemed an eternity to Will.

Suddenly the sound of hoofs was heard outside and the

shrill neigh of a horse sounded. Then the cabin door burst open and Zenas Pike walked in.

The bushwhacker's evil face was contorted with malicious smiles. He walked up to Will and pulled the gag from his mouth.

He did the same for Nellie.

"Now, yell all ye want to," he cried. "Yer friends are a good ways from hyar and yer won't see 'em ag'in right away. Ho! ho! ho! So Beauregard sent you out to bring me in, eh? Ho! ho! ho! That's a good joke. Why didn't he send a man instead of a stripling like you, eh? You are Jeff Prentiss' boy, are ye? Captain of ther Virginia Grays. Oh, I know ye! And hyar's yer pooty sister.

"Well, this is a good joke, eh, marm? What'll we do with these birds?"

The beldame turned and glared viciously at Nellie. She picked up the horse-pistol.

"Put 'em whar they'll be safe," she said. "I don't see what ye brought 'em hyar for, Zenas Pike."

"Wall, I don't, either," said the bushwhacker, folding his arms. "Ther young captain probably has a few hundred in his pockets. The gal is pooty and mebbe I could sell her ter some chap up in the mountains fer a wife——"

"You scoundrel!" gritted Will. "If you dare offer her injury it'll be death for you!"

"So!" said Pike, mockingly. "You've woke up, eh? That's a fine threat you made. How are you going to carry it out? You'll never go out of here alive."

"You murderer!"

"Wall, p'raps I am; but if yer goin' to be a bushwhacker yer might as well be a good one. Beauregard will git sick of sending men after me bye an' bye. I'm going to cut yer ears off first and send to him. Then I'll send your right hand. Oh, I'll send him a reminder, all right. Let's see what you've got that's valuable."

The monster went through Will's pockets. Nellie, dead-ly pale, moaned:

"Oh, Will; if only rescue would come!"

"Have courage, Nell," said Will, bravely. "It may come yet."

Pike took all of Will's money and his watch. Then he took a knife from his belt and whetted it.

What his purpose was could only be guessed. But it was never executed. Suddenly the beldame, with a catlike whine, put a cover over the fireplace, thus obscuring the light. The room was in semi-gloom.

With a savage exclamation Pike turned.

"What are you doing, marm?"

"Where are yer ears, ye simpleton?" snarled the hag.

"Hear ye nothing? Some one comes, friend or foe!"

"It can only be a foe," said Pike, as he took a carbine from the wall. "We'll see!"

Then there came a rap on the door. Pike flung it open and a man stood in the dim light on the threshold.

But he was covered by Pike's carbine.

"Hands up!" growled the bushwhacker. "Ye are a prisoner!"

"Oh, go easy, Zenas!" said the newcomer. "You and I can't quarrel; we are brothers-in-trade, you know."

"Dupee!" ejaculated Zenas, as he lowered the carbine.

It was the spy, who walked into the cabin boldly. The beldame at once removed the screen from the hearth.

The firelight revealed all in the room. It fell athwart Dupee's face. The treacherous spy was cool and evilly exultant over something.

"I'm onto it all, Zenas," said Dupee. "I know your prisoners well. I rather think the young captain will remember me."

He leered at Will, who looked at him unflinchingly and said:

"I remember you for a cowardly traitor. You tried to send me and my company to death."

"Made a bad job of it, didn't I?" said Dupee, nonchalantly. "Better luck next time. You've got the girl, too, have you, Zenas? What will you do with them?"

"Kill them!" replied the bushwhacker. "Dead people carry no tales."

"Just so! But I want you to turn that pretty girl over to me."

Zenas looked at the spy in surprise.

"What!" he exclaimed. "You want her? What do you want of her?"

"That's all right," said Dupee. "I have been long thinking of a wife. I may take a notion to marry her."

"Better that she should die!" cried Will, with deep feeling. "She will never marry you, you villain!"

"Indeed!" said Dupee, coldly. "She might do worse. Where her life is at stake she will listen to reason, I am sure."

He advanced to Nellie and tried to put an arm about her. She screamed wildly, and Will fought madly with his bonds.

The beldame laughed in a cackling way, and Zenas grinned. Nellie's screams were wild and piercing.

Providence had decreed in her favor, however. Suddenly the sound of hasty footsteps were heard outside the door. The next moment it was flung open.

A youth sprung into the room.

His handsome face flushed and his eyes danced with surprise. He took in the situation at a glance.

The beldame sprung for her horse-pistol. Both Dupee and Pike stood in an amazed and uncertain way.

The newcomer wore the uniform of a Union captain. His face was hot and flushed.

"What is this?" he demanded, in tones of thunder. "What cowardly game is this? Am I dreaming? Is it you, Nellie?"

He crossed the floor with a bound. The next moment he had slipped a knife-blade through the young girl's bonds and she was free.

Then he turned just in time to evade a savage blow aimed at his back with the knife held by Zenas Pike.

"Jack Clark of the Fairdale Blues!" cried Will Prentiss, with wild delight. "Oh, Jack! Thank God! You have come just in time to save us!"

"Will!" cried Jack, for he it was; "you here also? What scoundrelly work is this? Ah, stand off there, you fiends!"

The crack of a pistol rang out.

The beldame had seized the horse-pistol and fired at the young Union officer. By the greatest of good fortune the bullet went wide.

Jack made a leap forward and tore the weapon from the hag's hand.

Then he whipped out his sword and wheeled to attack Pike and Dupee. The two spies feared he had a score of Union troopers at his heels. They had leaped through the door and fled into the darkness.

To keep up the illusion Jack sprung to the door and shouted:

"After them, men! Head them off! Get them, dead or alive!"

But the two bushwhackers were on their horses and riding away madly, no doubt believing that they were pursued by Union soldiers.

A warning cry from Nellie, however, caused Jack to dart back into the cabin. He was none too soon.

The beldame, with flaming gaze, had a keen knife in her hand and was making a fierce attempt to reach the young girl.

Nellie had a chair upraised, ready to defend herself, but Jack caught the old woman's wrist and wrenching the weapon from her hurled her into the corner of the cabin.

"You miserable libel upon the name of woman!" cried the young Union officer. "You deserve hanging! Consider yourself lucky to escape punishment."

The beldame cowered on the floor and made no reply nor no effort to rise. But she shot malevolent glances at the young officer.

Jack wheeled and caught Nellie Prentiss in his arms.

"Nell!" he cried wildly. "My soul! It was Providence

sent me here at this moment. To think that you might have been killed."

For a moment Nell Prentiss was clasped in the arms of the young Union officer. In that moment forgotten was all sectional feeling, all differences between their peoples of the North and South.

CHAPTER X.

DARING DEEDS.

But the lovers were recalled to the practicabilities of the present by a lugubrious call from Will Prentiss.

"I say, there! Can't you let up on that spooning long enough to set me free? These ropes are cutting me in two."

In an instant Nell slipped from Jack's arms and the young Union officer turned. The woe-begone expression of Will's face caused them all to laugh.

A few moments before there was likely to have been enacted a scene of high tragedy in the bushwhacker's cabin.

Now a clever stroke of the brush of that wonderful artist, Fate, had transferred all into comedy.

"Well, my old pard," cried Jack, heartily, "blame your dear sister for this lapse of politeness on my part. Of course, I will not let you suffer longer."

With a quick stroke of the beldame's knife, which Jack picked up from the floor, he cut Will's bonds. The young captain of the Virginia Grays sprung to his feet.

The two young officers gripped hands. A handsome picture they made there in the firelight, one in his suit of Union blue, the other in his uniform of gray, and the beautiful young Southern girl standing beside them.

The scene seemed typical of what was to come after the war, with Nell as the angel of peace.

There was warm friendship in that hand-clasp. In that moment forgotten was the fact that they were foes, that duty demanded that they should meet as enemies on the battlefield.

"Will," said Jack, "how in the world did it happen? What brought you here?"

"My story is simple," replied the young Confederate officer. "General Beauregard commanded me to capture Zenas Pike, the bushwhacker. While, with four of my men, riding along the Vienna Turnpike, we came upon a fellow who claimed to be Simmons, a planter. He led us to this place as the retreat of Pike, and bringing me down "

alone, struck me on the head from behind and made a prisoner of me. I was astounded to find Nellie also a prisoner."

"And your men——"

"Pike probably went back and led them astray in the woods. I believe the monster would have murdered me but for your coming. Dupee came in just before you."

"Dupee is a traitor!" exclaimed Jack. "But tell us, Nell, how came you here?"

The young girl's face grew pale. For the first time she remembered the gulf between her and the young Union officer whom she liked so well.

She could not bring herself to tell him that she was on her way to Washington to take up the profession of a female spy.

She said simply:

"I left my father at Leesburg after the battle of Balls Bluff. With two servants for escort I was on my way to our plantation, near Fairfax, when we were attacked by Pike. He shot one of my escort and struck down the other. I remember nothing more until I found myself here."

"The atrocious scoundrel!" gritted Jack. "It is a pity he has gone free."

"I mean to get him before I go back to Manassas," said Will, resolutely, "but tell us, Jack, how did you happen along here at such an opportune time?"

"My story is a brief one," said Jack. "I was sent out with a party of our boys to do a little scouting in the vicinity of Fairfax. Some distance beyond here we ran into a cavalcade of Confederate scouts. We had a sharp fight with them, and my horse ran away with me, after I got a blow on the head which dazed me a bit.

"He took me deep into the woods, until he fell in a hole and broke his leg. I was obliged to leave him and try to find my way out as best I could. Chance brought me here, and, it seems, just in time."

"Just in time," cried Nell. "We are half way between the two armies, and——"

"We will call it neutral ground," laughed Jack.

"Of course, I wish it was all neutral," cried Will. "However, we must make the best of it here. We are enemies nominally, but friends in reality."

"Ah!" said Jack, with a serious tone, "I am one who wishes the war had never been."

A silence ensued for some moments. Nell walked to the window. Will bowed his head and gazed into the fire. Jack stood looking reflectively at the rafters.

The old beldame in the corner still remained glaring at him like a she-wolf in her den.

"For awhile the young Union officer said:

"At any rate, Will, at present we need not fear each other. If your men were here you might feel constrained to make a prisoner of me."

"And vice versa," said Will.

"No!" cried Nell, impassionedly. "You would neither of you do anything of the kind."

The two young officers laughed.

"That is a woman's idea of the rules of warfare," said Will.

"Would we were all women in spirit, then," said Jack, gallantly.

Nell advanced and looked straight at the young Union officer. Her voice rang clear as she said:

"You know as well as I that the South is not responsible for this war, Jack. You know that we must fight for our liberties. We cannot stand by and be trodden under foot by an arrogant, despotic government."

"I am fighting for what I believe is right, Nell, and that is the Union."

"Why should not the South have the right to direct its own affairs?"

"Washington founded our country. Its laws demand union and co-operation. Division means death."

"Then give the South her rights. Oh, Jack Clark, the war is all wrong!"

"That is true," cried the young Union officer. "Your argument is as forcible as mine. It is all a great misunderstanding, a great mistake which will not be realized until the country is drenched in blood and thousands of the flower of our manhood have been killed."

The subject was not discussed further, as being too painful for all. Will Prentiss had been at the window, and, now turning about, said:

"We must not remain here. What can we do?"

Jack picked up his sword and said:

"There is only one thing to be done. We must separate here. I must find my way back to my men and return to our lines.

"You must do the same. I would gladly offer my services as escort to you, Miss Nellie, to see you to a place of safety, but that seems hardly necessary."

"It is not," said Will, promptly, "and it might place you in jeopardy, Jack. Old friend, it is hard that we are arrayed against each other in this way. But perhaps after the war——"

Jack turned and bowed to Nellie.

"After the war," he repeated. She blushed prettily and smiled.

"That may mean a millennium for us all," she laughed.

"Good-bye, Jack."

"Good-bye, Nell."

The young Union officer walked out of the cabin and plunged into the night. Then Will wrapped his cloak about his sister.

"Come, Nellie," he said. "We must be far away from here by daybreak."

Together they plunged into the forest. Will knew something of the stars and he took a southward course, which he reckoned would carry him toward the Confederate lines.

For an hour they trudged on. At times distant shots were heard, perhaps the random firing of pickets, but the great woods were dark and silent.

Suddenly Nell gave an exclamation and came to a halt.

"Look, Will! What is that?"

The young Confederate officer gave a start. A star of light was seen far ahead. It grew in size, only to fade almost away at times.

"A camp fire!" said Will. "If it is only our men, now, we shall be all right."

"Oh, I hope it may be!" whispered Nell. "What shall we do, Will? Ought we not to go ahead and investigate?"

"Certainly!"

Carefully they crept on. As they drew nearer they saw that the blaze was a very little one at the base of a rock in a little dell.

Two men only were by the fire. One reclined on the ground as if asleep. The other sat with his back to the rock, but it seemed as if he was asleep also.

The campfire had been made apparently but a little while and the blaze was already dying out. The October air was chilly.

But Will could not help wondering at the temerity of any one building a campfire, even in those lonely woods, for the wandering bands of bushwhackers and stragglers were apt to pounce upon it.

But he was speedily to discover that the builders of the fire believed they incurred no risk, for they were of that very element.

Will crept cautiously nearer. The glow of the embers played on the features of the reclining man who was fast asleep.

Will gave a mighty start as he recognized those features. The sleeping man was Dupee, the spy!

Of course, his companion was the dreaded Zenas Pike!

For a moment deadly fear seized the young officer. It was not for his own safety but that of Nell.

Very cautiously he crept back.

"My soul!" he whispered to Nell. "Do you know who those fellows are?"

"Who are they?"

"Dupee and Pike!"

"You don't mean it?"

"Yes, I do. We have got to use the greatest of care not to arouse them——"

"Wait!"

Nell placed a hand on Will's arm. Her eyes glistened with sudden inspiration.

"What?"

"It is a glorious chance, Will. Why can't we capture them?"

For a moment the proposition startled the young Confederate. He stared at his sister in amazement.

"Nell, I never knew you had such grit," he declared. "Why, that is a grand scheme, if we could only carry it out."

"Why can't we?"

"Why—think of the odds. They are two powerful and desperate men against us two. You are only a girl."

"Only a girl, Will Prentiss! Fie on you for talking to your sister in such a way. Allow I am only a girl. You have with you Pike's carbine, which you took from the cabin."

"Yes."

"Well, you know that I can shoot as straight as an arrow. Let me poke the gun in Pike's face and I'll hold him while you stun Dupee and tie him up. If Pike dares to resist, I will fire. General Beauregard's orders are, 'dead or alive!'"

"You are right!" Will whispered. "Do you really feel equal to it, Nell? If we failed it would be awful for you."

"We will not fail," said the young girl, resolutely. "Only think how glorious it will be to march these two much-wanted traitors down to headquarters and turn them over to General Beauregard."

The picture dazzled Will Prentiss. He felt equal to any sort of risk.

"It shall be done," he said.

The fair and brave Southern girl gripped the carbine in her delicate but firm young hands and crept down to the circle of firelight. Just then Pike looked up and yawned.

CHAPTER XI.

AT MRS. MALCOLM'S.

As the bushwhacker raised his sleep-laden eyes he gazed full into the pale, set face of the young girl. He saw the muzzle of the deadly carbine not six inches from his head.

"Silence, or you die, Zenas Pike! At the least move I'll bore a hole through you."

Nell spoke with a force and meaning that held the desperado spellbound. Like one in a dream he gasped:

"Great sallymanders! You here?"

"Yes, I am here, and you are a prisoner. Make the slightest move and you die."

Pike was a desperate man and under no ordinary circumstances would he have permitted a slender young girl like this to brave him.

But he looked into the muzzle of the carbine. He knew its deadly qualities and saw her finger on the trigger. The light in her eyes told him that she was deadly in earnest.

Life is dear, even to men of Pike's worthless stamp.

So he obeyed. Meanwhile Will had reached the side of the sleeping Dupee.

The young Confederate officer had removed his belt. As he leaned over Dupee he pulled the spy's pistol from his belt and as the villain started up, Will dealt him a stunning blow over the temple.

Dupee sank back, half unconscious. By the time he had regained his senses his arms were strapped securely behind him with Will's belt.

Quickly the young captain of the Grays now bound Pike. Then he commanded the two spies to get upon their feet, while Nellie covered them with the carbine.

The bushwhackers were astounded and furious when they learned that they were captured by the young Confederate officer and his sister alone.

They made a violent effort to break their bonds, and were only quieted by Will, who placed the carbine to Pike's breast and cried:

"Cease struggling or I will shoot you both. It will be no less credit to me to take you to headquarters as corpses, for the orders are to get you, dead or alive!"

The two bushwhackers were helpless and obliged to yield to fate. They were marched away through the forest by the daring young Confederate captain and his plucky sister.

But now that Will had really effected the capture of the two notorious bushwhackers he was by no means sure of the result.

He would have given much at that moment to have seen Joe Spotswood and the others, with their horses. It would have seemed an assurance of getting the prisoners safely back into the Confederate lines.

But whether he would be able to do so under present circumstances was a problem.

He was really unaware of his exact whereabouts in the woods.

For aught he knew he might be marching straight into the Union lines. This, however, he did not believe, for he had kept, as near as he could reckon by the stars, a southward course.

This should bring him into the Confederate lines. On the other hand, he dreaded the moment of leaving the woods for the open country.

For in the woods there was a certain security from the possibility of being seen by raiding parties, of which many were flying about the country, and were more likely to be foes than friends.

Now that Will had effected the capture of the bushwhackers he disliked exceedingly to incur any risk of losing them.

But the long night was drawing to its close. Though he knew it not, the young Confederate captain had been tramping in circles through the woods all this while.

With the first gleam of daylight they saw an opening just ahead. A little tramp through the timber brought them in view of the open country.

Far in the distance they saw the roadbed of the Manassas Gap Railway. Down there below the rolling hills lay the Confederate headquarters and safety.

In the foreground was a field and rail fence. Beyond the fence was a house.

Will felt a sudden thrill of joy as he caught sight of a small Confederate flag waving over the door. It was clear evidence of the loyalty of the planter to the Confederacy.

It convinced the young captain that sympathy might be found there, and possibly valuable aid.

Nellie was quite exhausted from her night's thrilling experience. Will was himself not unwilling to accept this apparent opportunity for rest and succor. So he ordered the prisoners to march on, and thus they boldly left the woods and approached the house.

As they did so, they saw a colored man run into the house. In a moment there appeared in the doorway a tall, masculine specimen of a woman.

She held a carbine in her hand, but lowered it at sight of Will's Confederate uniform. She stared at the prisoners, and especially at Nell.

"Good morning, madam," said Will, respectfully. "Is your husband at home?"

"Husband?" exclaimed the woman, in a shrill voice. "The Yanks killed him over at Bull Run last spring. The fight made me a widder, but it didn't break my grit, as ye kin see by ther flag up thar."

Will touched his cap to the Stars and Bars and made reply:

"Bravely spoken, madam. I see you are loyal to the Confederacy."

"It seems you air, by yer uniform."

"Yes, I am Captain Will Prentiss of the Virginia Grays. This young woman is my sister, Nellie. We have been captured by bushwhackers; escaped, and, in turn, captured these two scoundrels, upon whose heads there is a price. I am taking them to General Beauregard, who will give them such justice as spies and traitors deserve."

"Bless my stars!" exclaimed the woman, staring at Nellie; "that's big talk for a boy like you, but I kin see you have ther grit. Wall, I'm Judith Malcolm, an' this 'ere's my farm, what's left of it. All my niggers but one hev run away. Every day some gang of Yankee scouts come galloping in here. They've got all my razor-backs, an' every chicken. They hain't taken my cow yet, but the Lord only knows why, 'cept she's old and tough."

"Very good, Mrs. Malcolm. I hope the Yankees won't happen along here right away. I am compelled to ask you for a bite of something to eat and the privilege of resting here a little while."

Mrs. Malcolm threw up her arms and shouted:

"Cuffey, you black dream, come out right smart an' git me that rasher of bacon in the smokehouse. I've got some yams an' some fresh laid eggs. I reckon I kin make ye a leetle coffee."

"You're an angel!" cried Will, joyfully.

"No, I ain't! I'm the contrariest critter you ever saw if ye don't treat me right. Eh! That's a pair of pizen sarpints ye hev there! Jest march 'em right inter ther sittin' room. I reckon ye'd better tie up ther feet."

Will marched his prisoners into the house, and, taking Mrs. Malcolm's advice, proceeded to tie their ankles, thus making them absolutely powerless.

Nellie, quite exhausted, sank into a chair. The rough planter's wife bent over her and kissed her, saying:

"Don't ye be afeard, puss! Aunt Judy Malcolm won't see no harm come to ye. Now a pail of water from the spring, Cuffey!"

In a marvelously short space of time Mrs. Malcolm had an appetizing meal ready. Will and Nell did ample justice to it. Some food was also given the prisoners, Cuffey undertaking the task of feeding them.

"Now, you 'uns lie down an' take a bit of a nap. Both of ye looks all beat out," said the big-hearted planter's wife. "Don't ye fear! Cuffey an' I will look out for the prisoners. No, they won't git away from us!"

Nellie was already ensconced under the counterpane of

Mrs. Malcolm's own bed, though she did not undress. Will cast himself upon a lounge and was in a few moments sound asleep.

He was awakened by a loud noise. In an instant he was upon his feet.

A startling scene was revealed. Mrs. Malcolm and Cuffey were in the yard, both armed, and the planter's wife was shouting and gesticulating to a number of mounted men on the other side of the rail-fence.

Will felt a thrill of wild excitement. A dozen men in blue uniforms sat on their horses out there.

They were Union raiders and their leader was questioning the planter's wife.

"No, I hain't seen no gray-backs around hyar," she vociferated. "Ye'll hev to look further. I'm a Southern lady an' I don't haul down that flag fer nobody!"

She referred to the Confederate flag which floated over the door.

"I'm sorry," said the Yankee raider, "but if you don't lower it, we'll have to do it for you!"

"Jest you try it!" screamed Judith. "The first of ye that comes over that rail-fence will be shot dead!"

She pulled back the hammer of her carbine and adjusted the cap. It was plain that she meant what she said.

The Union officer hesitated. It was purely a question of sentiment. There was little to be gained in a victory over this Southern woman by pulling down her flag.

Had it waved over a redoubt or a battery then there might have been some honor in causing it to be lowered.

The chief of the raiders half reined his horse about, but just at that moment a startling thing occurred.

Across the field from the woods there filed a party of mounted Confederate soldiers. From their position they could not see the Union raiders.

But the raiders saw them. It was quite enough. That they should thus so boldly ride into the open could not but convince the Union officer that there were more of them in the woods.

The possibility of capture was not pleasant, so he said: "All right, old lady; we'll come back and see you later."

The raiders' horses cleared the fence and away they went for the highway. The Confederate horsemen reined up.

Seeing the flight of the Union men they, however, rode on down to the house. As they came near, Will gave a cry of joy and rushed out of the house.

The Confederate horsemen were no other than his own comrades of the Virginia Grays. As he rushed into the yard he ran full into Judith Malcolm's arms.

"What's the matter with ye?" cried the planter's wife. "Are ye crazy?"

"No; but do you see those fellows approaching? They are my boys of the Virginia Grays!"

"Your boys?"

"Yes; I am their captain. Hello, Spotswood! Hello, boys! Champney! Payton! This way!"

The four Boys in Gray heard Will's voice and gave a yell of joy. The next moment they galloped in the yard.

They leaped from their saddles and surrounded their captain.

The scene was a joyful one.

"Great guns!" cried Champney. "We gave you up as done for, Will. We thought that Simmons led you to your death!"

"Yes," cried Spotswood, "we have scoured the woods for him."

"Well, I escaped, and I have a long story to tell you," cried Will. "Come into the house."

CHAPTER XII.

A HAPPY ENDING.

Into the house went the Boys in Gray. They were astonished at what they found there.

Nellie, who had arisen, met them and they greeted her warmly. But the sight of the two bushwhackers stupefied them.

"Gee whiz!" gasped Chamney, "how did you do it, Will? And all alone, too?"

"Not alone," objected Nell, with a laugh; "he had me!"

"Certainly!" cried the other boys, all bowing extravagantly. "The bravest young woman in the Southern Army!"

Nellie blushed, but was pleased. Will then told his story in detail.

The boys listened with interest. They had little to tell, save that they had scoured the woods for their young captain.

"But we found you at last," cried Spotswood. "And now all we've got to do is to ride back to Manassas with the bushwhackers."

The boys were in high spirits. Their expedition had certainly been a great success. General Beauregard would be much pleased and great honor was due them.

But just at that moment Judith Malcolm entered the house. Her face looked grave and stern.

"Are ye all well armed?" she asked.

"Yes," replied Spotswood.

"Well, thar'll be a chance fer ye to do some fightin' right away, I think."

"Fighting?" exclaimed Will.

"Yes!"

"What do you mean?"

"Go to the door an' ye kin see fer yourself. Those Union raiders are coming back, and they've got more with them."

This was startling news. Will went out into the yard. He saw that a detachment of infantry had joined the horsemen and were deploying through the fields.

They were moving rapidly to surround the house. There was no time to lose if an escape was to be made.

But at a glance Will saw now that this was not going to be possible. It would be better to make a stand at the house.

The infantry line moved up on one side and the horsemen on the other. Will at once organized a plan of defence.

The horses were hurried into a shed nearby. Then the Boys in Gray, a mere handful they were, took up their position at the rail-fence. They had their carbines and army pistols.

Judith Malcolm stood shoulder to shoulder with them, with her carbine loaded and ready to do her share of the fighting.

But the Union soldiers did not open the fire. In a few moments a white flag was seen approaching.

It was carried by a young corporal, who came up to the rail-fence boldly and said:

"Lieutenant Carter sends his compliments and says that if you surrender now he will give you the best possible terms."

"Return my compliments to Lieutenant Carter, and tell him that we have no intention of surrendering," replied Will. "I am Captain Prentiss of the Virginia Grays. Also tell him that his position is one of danger, for reinforcements may arrive at any moment."

This last statement was a bluff, but the corporal went away with the impression stamped upon his mind that this might be a possibility, for it was a fact that they were very near the Confederate lines.

The flag of truce not having resulted in the surrender of the little party of defenders, the Union raiders began to move nearer and opened fire.

The bullets went whistling through the rail-fence and several slight wounds were suffered by the defenders. As ammunition was limited, only judicious firing could be allowed in reply.

But it soon became too hot in the open yard and the defenders retired to the house. The battle now became hot.

The walls of the house were punctured, the window sashes were shot away and it was only by lying flat on the floor that the defenders escaped death.

The contest, fierce as it was now becoming, could not last long. Already the attacking party could be seen preparing for a charge.

"I reckon it's all up, Captain," said Joe Spotswood. "I hate to suggest it, but hadn't we better surrender?"

It was against Will's military spirit to surrender. Only one thing prompted him to consider it, and this was the fact that two of the party were women.

Their lives should be preserved. The impulse was upon him to give assent to the plan when a startling thing happened.

Far away in the distance was heard a ringing cheer. Judith Malcolm leaped up and swung her arms.

"They're running, the cowards!" she cried. "They've given it up. Reinforcements are coming! We're saved!"

The crackling sound of musketry in the distance was corroboration of this. The Boys in Gray gave a wild cheer and rushed out of the shot-riddled house.

A thrilling scene burst upon their view. From the direction of the Confederate lines was advancing a line of Gray.

The glitter of the bayonets and the flash of light on the gun-barrels was dazzling in the sun. It was seen to be a full company, and their standard flaunted in the breeze jauntily.

The Union raiders were vastly outnumbered and seeing this they had accepted discretion as the better part of valor and retreated into the woods.

They exchanged shots as they went, but a few volleys from the advancing Confederate company caused them to retire precipitately.

Nearer swept the line of gray toward the house until their uniforms could be plainly seen. Judith was wildly excited and delighted, and Nellie had come out and leaned on Will's arm, her face illumined with joy.

But just then Joe Spotswood gave a wild yell. It was echoed by the others in the company. Will sprung to the top of the rail-fence and shaded his eyes.

The cry sent up by the sergeant was:

"It's our own company, boys! It's the Virginia Grays!"

Will Prentiss could hardly believe it. How had the Grays appeared at this unexpected moment and place? What had brought them at such an opportune time?

It was a question to be answered later.

For the company of Confederate soldiers coming to their rescue was undoubtedly the Grays, and Lieutenant Fred Randolph, on a black horse, at their head.

Will swung his cap and yelled in sheer delight. He was recognized by the approaching Grays and the effect was electrical.

They broke ranks wildly and rushed across the field, cheering and waving their arms. The scene was an inspiring one.

A few moments later the party was surrounded by the brave company of Richmond boys. It was a joyful time for all.

Will and his companions were compelled to tell the story over and over again many times. When it was learned that the two notorious bushwhackers were at that moment captives in the house the excitement was intense.

The two prisoners were led out and taken in charge by Sergeant Spotswood and a squad of men.

Gallantly the Virginia Grays cheered Nellie Prentiss, the brave Southern girl, who had helped her brother make the capture.

Will bowed low to the Widow Malcolm and said, gallantly:

"I cannot thank you sufficiently for the kindness you have done us. I shall mention you to General Beauregard and I have no doubt you will be fully recompensed for the damage to your property by the Congress."

"I ask no return," replied Judith Malcolm, with dignity. "It's my contribution to the cause."

So the Virginia Grays formed and at the tap of the drum marched away to the highway on their return to Manassas. They gave a parting cheer to the brave planter's widow.

Fred Randolph explained easily how it happened that the Grays chanced upon the spot at such an opportune time.

"We got tired of hanging about the camp-ground," he said. "We had an idea that we might do you a service if we could only get permission to make a reconnaissance toward the enemy's lines. I secured General Beauregard's permission, and that is all there is to it."

"Well," said Will, with a deep breath, "you must have acted on an inspiration, for if you had not appeared as you did, you would have been lacking your captain and four of your comrades, besides the captured spies."

"I can assure you I am glad that we did so," said Fred.

The march back to Manassas was devoid of any thrilling incident.

But when they passed into the lines and reached the camp-ground the report spread that the Virginia Grays had captured Zenas Pike and Dupee, the spy.

The entire line of regiments tumbled out of their quar-

ters, and intense excitement was the result. Everybody crowded forward and wanted to see the Grays and their prisoners.

When the report reached General Beauregard an orderly appeared on the scene instantly.

Captain Prentiss and his sister, as well as the other members of the party who took part in the expedition, were at once ordered, with the prisoners, into the presence of the Confederate general.

General Beauregard sat at his camp-table, with a couple of subordinate officers, as the party entered. The two spies were led in by a couple of the Grays.

Will and Nellie followed. General Beauregard rose gallantly and bowed low, tendering her his chair. Then he said:

"What is this story of the remarkable capture of these scoundrels, Prentiss? Let me have it from you."

Simply and modestly Will told the story of their adventures; their experiences at the cabin; Captain Clark's visit, and also of the later capture of the bushwhackers.

General Beauregard listened with the deepest interest and surprise.

"This sounds like a chapter from a romantic novel," he declared. "It excels any incident of the campaign thus far. You have covered yourself with glory, Captain Prentiss. Congress shall pass upon this brave deed of yours."

"And you, Miss Prentiss, I have not words with which to express my full appreciation of your bravery and devotion to the flag. I would be glad to make you an honorary member of my staff, with the rank of colonel, if you care to accept."

"The honor is greater than I deserve, General, but I accept, with pleasure."

In spite of all, the report that Nellie Prentiss had been commissioned as an honorary colonel spread to the lines of soldiers outside, and cheers went up wildly. Of course, the appointment was honorary and in the line of a compliment, but Miss Prentiss was ever after called by the Boys in Gray, "Colonel Nell."

A military court was at once organized and Zenas Pike and Dupee were given a brief trial.

The result was that they were convicted and sentenced to be shot at sunrise. The sentence was executed in due form on Pike.

But in some mysterious way Dupee escaped in the night, and, running the guard and picket, lived to make further trouble during the war.

The next day General Beauregard sent for Will and had a long private conversation with him.

The truth was, the great Confederate general had discovered in Will Prentiss the elements of a trusted officer and brave and loyal confidant. He was willing to offer him a high commission on his staff.

But the young captain declined.

"I must remain with the Virginia Grays," he declared. "They are my comrades and I have given my word to stay with them."

"Yet, the duty you owe the Confederacy should be considered," said the great leader.

"I will endeavor to serve the cause just the same in my capacity of captain," replied Will. "I can be detached at any time and for any service."

General Beauregard bowed.

"Perhaps you are right, my boy. At any rate, you shall have your way."

So Will went back to his comrades.

Some days of inaction now followed. But these days were improved in drill and the recruiting of the company, which now had again reached its full quota.

Camp-life is sometimes monotonous and the soldier will chafe and grow discontented, but Will Prentiss knew that the war had only just begun.

Beyond the lines there was brewing a conflict which would stagger humanity. Battles such as the world had never witnessed for desperation and fierceness were to be fought. Incidents without number, experiences of the most exciting sort were in store for the little company of Virginia Grays.

The day was right at hand when they would be called upon again to go to the front and fight as only true soldiers should.

They were ready and willing. They were brave and loyal. They had an able and true captain, and success and honor was to strew their path.

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